

# THE LOST DRAGONS OF BARAKHAI

VOLUME TWO OF  
THE BOOKS OF BARAKHAI

**Mickey Zucker  
Reichert**

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*To Sheila Gilbert the other half of the equation.  
May she inspire, assist, and torture writers  
(including me) for many many many more decades.*

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# Chapter 1

WILD barking awakened Benton Collins, and he sprang from his bed without thinking. The top sheet and blanket entangled his legs, sending him sprawling, heart pounding, on the floor. Whining frantically, Korfius thrust a wet nose into his face.

Collins pushed the dog away. He lived in graduate student housing, which normally did not allow pets; however, Korfius was considered a hero, for bringing the help that saved Collins' life. The Algary College staff and his neighbors politely looked the other way, treating Korfius like a seeing eye dog and not throwing him up as an example whenever their own better-concealed cats, fish, and birds got evicted.

"Quiet, Korfius," Collins demanded, sitting on the bed and extricating himself from the awkward, encumbering twist of coverings. He groped for his glasses on the standard issue dresser, clamped a hand over one wire temple piece, and put them in place on his nose one-handed. "You'll wear out your welcome barking at..." Collins glanced at the digital clock at his workstation. "3:16 a.m.!" He ran a hand through sleep-tousled, dark brown hair and groaned. "What the hell are you doing up at 3:16 AM?"

Korfius nuzzled Collins, then ran toward the window, planted his forepaws on the sill, and bounced back. In his excitement, he leaped on Collins' bed, over him, and back to the window again. Collins watched the gangly legs sail past, the ears flying, the tongue lolling, the short coat an uneven patchwork of brown and white. Though fourteen years old, the half-grown hound aged in human, not dog, years and had the exuberance of a six-month-old puppy. Collins had acquired Korfius in Barakhai, a world he had entered accidentally by chasing a white rat through the hallways of Daubert Laboratories. There, he had discovered people who spent half or more of their lives as various animals. The few who had come to his world remained in animal form throughout their visits, and Korfius had chosen to stay because he liked Collins and preferred being a full-time dog.

Over the last year and a half, Collins had grown as fond of Korfius as the dog had of him, though he still found their association a bit uneasy. He used leashes and collars only when absolutely necessary and shared his own food because it seemed vulgar to feed a child Puppy Chow. Dressed only in his sleeping boxers and glasses, Collins headed toward the window. A cool summer breeze chilled his torso.

Something thumped onto Collins' shoulder. He staggered backward with a savage gasp, smacking the object with the back of one hand. It felt warm and solid, furry against his skin, and it tumbled to the bed. A shiver coiled through Collins, and he whirled to look. A white rat braced itself on the disheveled pile of sheet and blanket, whiskers twitching madly.

Collins stifled a scream, then logic took over. *It can't be. Can it?*

Korfius bounded onto the bed, sending the rat flying. It scrambled onto Collins' pillow.

"Hey!" Collins said.

The rat cocked its head. "Hey, yourself. What kind of greeting is slapping me across the room?"

*It IS Zylas.* Glad to see his old friend again, Collins replied in kind, "The normal reaction to being attacked by a rat. What would you do if something jumped on your shoulder?"

Zylas twisted his head to look over the snowy fur on the back of his neck. "Anything small enough to alight on my shoulder would have to be an insect, so I guess I'd... I'd eat it."

Still grossed out by one of the Barakhains' main sources of protein, Collins made a noise of revulsion. "You'd eat it, huh?" He pinned the rat with a searching stare. "So you got off easy." He avoided the image of dining on raw, unskinned rat meat, not wishing to arouse a more painful memory. When he had first arrived in Barakhai, he had roasted and eaten a rabbit. Only when the villagers attempted to hang him for murder and cannibalism did he discover the dual nature of its citizenry. *Every human an animal, and*

*every animal a human.* Collins did not forget the exception to the rule. *Except fish, which they eat freely and don't consider animal.*

"Good point." Zylas paused to give Korfius a warning nip on the jowl that sent the dog into barking retreat. One hind foot slipped over the edge, and the dog flopped to the floor. "Quiet, Korfius. I'm glad to see you, too, but we can say 'hello' without the ear-shattering racket."

The dog cocked his head, tail waving, chin resting on the bed. Usually, the animals of Barakhai could not communicate much better than the ones in Collins' own world, but a crystal that Zylas always carried allowed him to speak even with other creatures.

*Crystal. Where is the crystal?* A million questions came to Collins' mind at once. Before he had left Barakhai, nearly dead from a beating and a fall, he had captured another crystal, one that enhanced magic, from Barakhai's king and delivered it to one of Zylas' renegades. With the help of the last dragon, the only beings who could use magic, the renegades had planned to remove the curse that forced them to cycle through an animal form each day. Collins wondered about the friends he had made in that strange Otherworld called Barakhai. Did the crystal ever reach Prinivere, that ancient, feeble dragon who was also a distant ancestor of Zylas? Did it enhance the little bit of magic she could still manage? Clearly, she had not actually lifted the curse, or Zylas would have come to Collins in man form. Unlike Korfius, he preferred being human.

Before Collins could frame the first question, a trumpeting whinny froze him in place. He forced himself to turn toward the window, where a familiar fuzzy head peered in at them. A black forelock lay tousled over a wide, golden nose, and black ears formed excited, pricked-forward triangles. The mare tipped her head to regard them all through one shockingly blue eye.

Startled at finding a horse in the quadrangle, Collins gasped. "What the hell did you bring her for?" Despite his accusatory question, Collins found himself smiling at Falima. For reasons he could not explain, he had thought of her often in the year since he had last seen her. It had taken her a long time to forgive his crimes of ignorance; but, once she had, he found her a brave and loyal ally. He stroked the silky nose and scratched behind her ears. She rested her chin on the sill, sighing heavily.

"Bring her?" Zylas paced a circle on Collins' pillow. "Do you think I could stop her?"

Collins could not answer. He knew the one-way portal allowed anyone to pass from his world to theirs, but only animals could move in the opposite direction. He had no idea whether they had to be in beast shape when they approached the portal or whether the simple act of passing through it made the change for them. In Barakhai, they had essentially no control over the switch. It happened at the same time each and every day: Zylas at the equivalent of noon and midnight, Falima at 6:00. Presumably, Zylas could have chosen a time when he held rat form and Falima human to sneak through the portal; but that would prove difficult. While a human, Falima would have the mental and physical wherewithal to prevent Zylas' leaving without her. While a horse, she only needed to follow him. And, despite a few brief visits to Collins' world in the past, Zylas might not realize the problems inherent in bringing a full-grown horse into an urban setting. Where he came from, all horses served as guards and lived in the most civilized areas.

Unconsciously, Collins adopted the high-pitched, singsong speech pattern most adults use when speaking to babies and animals. "Can you talk in animal form now, too?"

Zylas answered for Falima. "Not yet. Overlap's not good enough."

Collins remembered that "overlap" referred to the ability to recall animal times in human form and vice versa. Zylas, he knew, had what the old dragon called near-perfect overlap.

Zylas paced the mattress, and Korfius' eyes followed his every movement. "That crystal you liberated allowed Prinivere to make more translation stones, but Falima tends to drop hers when she lapses into... full horsiness."

Collins yawned, suddenly remembering what time it was. "It's great to see you guys, but it's the middle of the night, and I've got classes in the morning. Why don't we all get some sleep and..." The ridiculousness of his own suggestion penetrated his sleep-fogged brain before he could even get a reply. "But not in the quad. A horse... would be noticed." *And I'll get thrown out on my ear. This definitely breaks my lease.*

"Indeed." Zylas bowed his ratty head. "That's why we need to talk in Barakhai. Come with me, please."

"Barakhai!" Collins found himself shouting and lowered his voice. "I can't go back there." He still bore the scars of two falls: the first down the kingdom steps with soldiers and servants stabbing and beating at him, the second a desperate leap from the parapets. Collins had tossed torches at the king's most faithful, including Carrie Quinton, an adviser from his own world, and the king's brother. It seemed impossible that he would not get arrested the moment he set foot in Barakhai, sentenced to another hanging... or worse. *Worse? What could be worse than strangling to death?* It surprised Collins just how swiftly the answer came to his mind. The possibilities for a slow, agonizing death seemed infinite.

Zylas balanced on his back paws. "You have to, Ben. We need you."

Collins did not agree. He studied Falima, suddenly wishing he had worn more to bed. The physical therapy from his injuries, and the healthy habits it started, left him with some muscular definition to a once too-skinny chest. He had grown a few more chest hairs, bringing his total to ten; and he had honed his arms and legs so he no longer resembled a scarecrow. Collins found himself hoping Falima had noticed the positive changes that had occurred over the past year. "I'd feel a lot better if you *asked* me. This time." He made a direct and scathing reference to Zylas' previously luring him into Barakhai and danger without giving Collins the least hint of what he was about to get involved.

Zylas' heady red eyes turned liquid. He clamped his front paws together and lowered his head. "Please?"

"No."

Zylas' pointy face jerked up.

Collins suddenly felt foolish and cruel. It seemed unreasonable to request politeness and consideration, then turn it down outright. "I'm sorry. I have a life here. In Barakhai, I'm a dead man."

Zylas stared, and his eyes turned steely. "At least... you have a life somewhere." He turned with an unratlike air of irritation and dignity. "I thought you'd just hear us out. I thought you might care, be curious. Or, that you might want a chance to talk to Korfius again."

Collins felt all of those things; but the last, strangely, seemed the most compelling reason of all. He did want to know if Korfius was satisfied with this way of life, if he could do anything to make the dog/boy more comfortable, if Korfius might not prefer his dual life in Barakhai. Collins had made a lifelong commitment to the dog, since Korfius would probably outlive him. If Zylas and Falima had come at a more decent hour, he might be able to think more clearly. "We can't talk here," Collins reasoned aloud. "You... maybe, okay. But a horse? No, that won't go unnoticed." Now suspicious, he wondered if Falima had come simply to force the issue. Without her, Zylas could have safely stayed and chatted.

Zylas turned a circle, clearly reading Collins' wavering. "Come with us. We can talk at the entrance, or in a safe house, if you wish. We can always send you right back."

Sensing another trap, Collins found the problem. "It's a one-way door. Once I go through, I can't get home."

"Not the same way," Zylas admitted. "But Prinivere now has enough power to send you back."

Collins still hesitated, unsure.

"She got you back last time, didn't she?"

Collins had to admit that she had. Otherwise, he would have died of his wounds in Barakhai, not recovered in Algary's Intensive Care Unit. "Pretty much in pieces."

Zylas could not argue the point and, to his credit, did not try. "You can leave whenever you want. Whenever you decide."

Collins set his jaw, considering despite his better judgment. He had finally got himself on the right track. It had taken him months to recover enough to return to school full-time. He had won back his laboratory assistanceship and found a way to make money using the translation skills Prinivere had magically bestowed upon him to allow communication with the humans of Barakhai. The doctors could not explain how a head wound could make a biology graduate student who had struggled through high school Spanish speak every language they could throw at him fluently, but the hospital appreciated his ability to bridge the gap between explanation and understanding for their non-English-speaking patients. Prinivere's spell did not extend to the written word, however, so they could not simply ask him to translate common descriptions and treatments into brochures. He had paid off most of his student loans, the semester's tuition, maintained his quarters and his dog, and still had some pocket money for campus movies, pizza, and an occasional, thus far unsatisfying, date.

Falima thrust her muzzle back through the window to whicker a low "come on." Zylas gave Collins a pleading look. Korfius stood by the bed, tail wagging.

Collins heaved a sigh. "If I wasn't out-of-my-mind exhausted, I'd never even consider this." He gave Zylas a steady scrutiny that he hoped looked rock hard. "I get to decide when I leave Barakhai?"

Zylas waved a paw. "You get to decide."

"Even if it's immediately?"

Collins saw no downside. He could still reconsider on the walk to the portal; and, even once there, it was not an irreversible choice. It seemed safer to discuss any matter with a horse somewhere other than the middle of campus.

"Why don't you pack a few things," Zylas said. "Just in case."

It was a reasonable suggestion, though it made Collins wary. "I can leave Barakhai any time? Even immediately?"

Zylas opened his lids wider, making his fiery eyes seem to bulge from their pink-rimmed sockets. "You're repeating yourself."

"It's called reassuring," Collins crinkled his nose. "And don't do that eye thing. It's freakish."

"Thanks." Zylas restored his features to normal. "I love it when my friends call my looks freakish."

Collins dodged the all-too-wide opening. The "eye thing" barely touched the "transforming-into-animals thing." Without another word, he scooped up his backpack from the workstation chair and dumped its contents onto the bed. Books, notebooks, and pens tumbled out, along with an assortment of pipettes, a compartmentalized container filled with plastic balls and stems for making models of molecules, and sundry other small accessories. He tossed two packs of TGI Friday's matches back inside, added a mini mag light, his new multitool, three T-shirts, four pairs of underwear, and two pairs of blue jeans. He dashed into the bathroom, Korfius trotting along at his heels. Opening the medicine chest, he snatched up a bottle of Turns and another of Tylenol, dropping them into the sink. He tossed in a bar of soap, a toothbrush, a razor, a plastic bottle of shampoo, deodorant, and toothpaste. Seizing the hand towel, he folded all of his gathered things into it, bundled it up, and headed from the room. As a last thought, he scooped up a roll of toilet paper. Dashing back to the bedroom, he unceremoniously dumped it all inside his backpack.

"All right—" Collins started, then stopped, thinking of another potentially useful item. He jerked open his desk drawer to reveal his new personal organizer, a programmable calculator, a mini tape recorder, fold-up binoculars, and his working snacks. He had gone after the binoculars but grabbed the recorder, three Snickers bars, a handful of beef jerky, and an open bag of dog biscuits, too. He was just adding these to his now bulging backpack, when a pounding knock at the door startled him. Collins' mind had already returned to the nearly inscrutable world of his companions, with its weird violations of physical law and its strict and cruel legalities and punishments. He forced his muscles to uncoil, his breathing to slow. The worst thing he faced here was expulsion or bankruptcy, a far cry from hanging.

"Hide," Collins hissed at Zylas; who, accustomed to doing just that, disappeared in an instant. Without bothering to give a similar command to Falima, he headed toward the door, just as another fusillade of knocking exploded through the room. Loud as thunder, it left no doubt about the mood of the person on the other side.

Collins pulled open the door, only then remembering he wore nothing but boxers.

Professor Terellin studied him from the hallway, and several people peeked from partially open doors on either side. The proctor of Collins' building, the gray-bearded philosophy professor usually handled problems in a calm, rational manner that left little room for discussion. Now, his hair hung in a lopsided auburn-and-white scraggle, rather than its usual neat comb over. Long-legged, slender, and distinguished, Terellin reminded Collins of John Cleese playing the barrister in *A Fish Called Wanda*. He glanced around the hallway, and the doors hurriedly shut. "May I come in?"

Collins stepped back. "Of course, Professor."

Terellin glided inside, closing the door behind him. He studied Collins in the dim light, then turned his gaze to Korfius who lay in a stretched-out position of doggy comfort on Collins' rumpled bed. The man cleared his throat. "We ignore your dog, Mr. Collins, despite the no pet policy, because he's a hero."

Collins nodded, well aware of that information. He had never taken great pains to hide the animal, though he did not go out of his way to flaunt the dog either. "Yes, sir. Thank you."

"But a horse, Mr. Collins?" The professor made a bland gesture toward the window. "That's going too far."

Collins' heart rate quickened, and he followed the professor's motion with his gaze. Possibilities paraded through his mind, the most compelling to deny knowing anything about Falima's presence. He discarded the urge, however. For her welfare, he could not abdicate responsibility. "Yes, Professor Terellin. I agree."

The man grunted.

"You see, we need the horse for physiology experiments and... "So far, the explanation sounded plausible, and Collins struggled to keep it that way. "... and I... well, I did the ordering. I certainly didn't expect them to deliver her to my home but" Collins battled through the sleepiness that dimmed his thoughts. "well, here she is. I jumped right out of bed and started making some calls, but it's hard to get anyone to answer this time of night."

Professor Terellin's expression softened immediately. "Any luck at all?"

Collins rubbed a hand along his other naked arm, a nervous gesture. "I found a stable that'll take her." He deliberately avoided saying where in case anyone checked the story. "I just have to get her there." He gestured to his backpack. "I was just getting ready for the trip."

"And dressing?" Terellin suggested.

Collins blushed. He wore boxers to bed rather than his usual briefs out of modesty, but it was still underwear. "Just getting to that, sir."



A bit of testiness returned to the professor's demeanor. "Well, hurry, please, Mr. Collins. I don't want to have to explain this to the board. Or to the next fifteen people who want to know why they can't keep a finch but I'll let you turn the quadrangle into a barn. What's next? Pigs?"

Collins tried a joke, though he was too nervous to make it a good one. "We've got some of the guinea variety at the lab."

"No, thank you." The philosophy professor turned on his heel. "Just get that horse out of here."

"Right away," Collins promised.

The professor glanced back over his shoulder. "Do you want me to let your department know you won't be in today?"

Collins considered, imagining the philosophy professor delivering his cockamamie story to his crusty biology preceptor. The explanations that followed would probably turn wilder, enveloping him in an inescapable twist of increasingly outrageous lies. Ultimately, he would have to come up with a logical experiment involving horses or lose his fellowship. "Thank you, sir, but I'll do it by e-mail."

"All right," Terellin said. "You just get that smelly animal out of here ASAP."

"Consider it done." This time, the professor crossed the room and exited into the hallway without looking back. When the door clicked shut, Collins sank down on the bed, feeling as tired as if he had jogged three miles. A furry muzzle jostled his hand, and he reached down to pet Korfius, only to realize the dog lay sleeping beside him. He opened his eyes to Zylas.

"You're quick with words," the rat said.

"A quick liar," Collins grumbled. "Something to write home about."

"So long as it's for the right reasons."

Collins simply shrugged. It was not the way his parents had raised him. *The same parents who pretended to love one another throughout my childhood, then divorced and forgot all about me as soon as I left home.* He realized they might not serve as stellar examples either.

Apparently sensing Collins' continued consternation, Zylas elaborated. "So long as you don't start equating whatever you want to 'right,' you don't have a problem."

Collins looked at the albino rat, who returned his stare, whiskers twitching earnestly. *Deceive the philosophy professor, then talk philosophy with vermin.* Mobilized, he rose, throwing up his hands at the whole ludicrous idea. "I'm getting dressed."

Collins pawed through his clothing, emerging with a green pocket tee, comfortable jeans, gym socks, and a clean pair of briefs. Turning his back to the window and Falima, he removed his sleeping boxers, then pulled on his briefs and last night's jeans. He shook out the T-shirt. "This warm enough for the weather there?" He did not worry about his packed clothing. Barring a sudden attack of insanity, he would not be staying in Barakhai long.

Zylas bobbed his head. "Though you might want something with sleeves in the woods. For protection."

"For protection?" Collins knew Zylas meant from weeds, branches, and bugs, but he could not help adding, "What I really need for protection is Kevlar."

"Kevlar?" Zylas repeated.

"Never mind." Collins finished dressing, then pulled on his running shoes without bothering to untie them. He tossed the backpack across his left shoulder. "Let's go."

Zylas sprang to Collins' shoulder. Falima whinnied, and Collins cringed. He whistled sharply. "Come

on, Korfius."

The dog leaped to immediate attention, then sprang from the bed to caper merrily at Collins' feet. Usually, the dog did not get to accompany him in the morning, when he attended classes. Collins reached for the knob, then froze in mid-movement. "I'd better send that e-mail. And I'll need something to lead Falima with."

"Not necessary," Zylas said in his ear. "We can ride her."

*Without a saddle or bridle? Like that wouldn't raise any more suspicions.* Collins snapped on the power-strip switch, then scanned the room for something ropelike while his Gateway EV70 and its accompanying paraphernalia ran through their opening sequence. "I know that. But no one's going to believe my story if I hop up on a strange horse without anything to control it and don't worry about getting bucked to China." As his gaze fell across the familiar sparse furnishings, he mentally discarded using electrical cords, rubber bands, and duct tape. His desk filled one corner of the room, most of its surface taken up by the computer with its screen, speakers, CPU, and his Hewlett-Packard LaserJet printer perched upon the familiar, black and white cow-spotted box that had contained the shipped computer. An empty coffee can held pens, pencils, and markers and his assorted hard rock tapes and CDs. On the shelf above sat the combination CD player/double tape deck/radio that played them. Beside the desk, the television offered him nothing. He considered twisting up the bed-sheets or rifling the dresser to find some clothing to sacrifice to the cause.

"Falima doesn't need to be led." Zylas' whiskers tickled Collins' ear. "She'll come along."

Focused on the rope hunt, Collins jumped at Zylas' voice. "True, but it'll look really weird if a horse follows me around like a puppy."

The speakers blared out the six beats of music that indicated the computer's readiness. Collins leaned over his chair, grasped the mouse, and clicked on the internet icon. The hourglass appeared, the icon darkened, and the globe whirled in the upper right-hand corner. Finally deciding he might have some rope in the kitchen junk drawer, Collins started to head back in that direction. A roll of speaker cord caught his eye as he moved, and he grabbed it instead.

The high-pitched dialing notes rang from the speakers, followed by the intermittent static and up-and-down resonances of the connection.

"What's wrong with looking weird?" Zylas stared at the computer.

Collins seized the coated wire, then returned to the keyboard. "Nothing, if you're a total geek, I guess. Mostly, I don't want people asking a bunch of questions. If I start blathering on about other worlds and animals who turn into people, I'll wind up locked in a loony bin like that first guy you lured to Barakhai." Dropping the coil into his pocket, he tapped out a quick, vague e-mail about a family emergency, clicked off-line, and initiated shutdown. "People already think I'm too tight with my dog. Imagine what they'll think if a horse just—" Abrupt realization bombarded him. "—or if I've got a rat hanging out on my shoulder!" He patted himself down for a suitable pocket and realized that the one in his T-shirt would prove way too flimsy and small and the ones in his jeans seemed equally unsuitable, mostly for anatomical reasons. Collins found himself wishing for the loose, coarse weave of Barakhain clothing. "You'll have to go in the pack."

"Great," Zylas muttered with a discontented sigh. Nevertheless, he did as Collins bade.

Only then, Collins thought to mention, "Hey, you're talking to me without your translation stone."

The pack muffled Zylas' reply. "I am."

Collins had believed the rest of the question was implied; but, when Zylas did not go on, he asked, "How?"

"Prinivere."

The response confused Collins, but he did not press Zylas for more information now. He would have the opportunity to ask all of his questions when he no longer had to worry about getting a horse out of the quad before anyone else saw her.

When the monitor went blank, Collins flicked the power switch. Walking to the door of his apartment, he opened it and stepped into a hallway empty except for the other doors and Professor Terellin who waited with his arms folded impatiently over his chest.

"Sorry." Collins flushed. "Had to send that e-mail and pack a few things."

The professor bobbed his head without speaking.

Collins hurried down the hallway and out the back door into the quadrangle, and Korfius followed. The false dawn painted red shadows across the benches spotted randomly around the central garden. Pathways crisscrossed the courtyard, leading to a dormitory, the English Building, and the Student Union. Falima still stood peering into his window.

"Horse," Collins whispered, not wanting to use her name for fear of exposing his lies.

Falima's head jerked upward, then tipped sideways as she searched for him.

"Over here, Horse."

Falima found Collins with one eye, then trumpeted out a welcoming whinny.

Cringing, Collins took out the speaker wire and unwrapped a length.

Falima ran to him with a speed that seemed unstoppable. Collins back-stepped and pressed against the building, but need not have worried. The horse came to an abrupt halt in front of him, prancing and snorting in greeting.

Collins wrapped the soft, pliable wire in a loop around Falima's neck, guiding her away from the quadrangle, around the graduate student housing building, to the main walkway through the campus. Surreptitiously, he looked for droppings and noticed none. He did not know whether doing so might insult his friends, but he could not afford to leave such an obvious telltale. He could imagine the students trying to puzzle out a huge animal flop appearing in the quadrangle in the middle of the night. At the least, they would be watching for a major prank; at the worse, it would spark the very protest about pets that Professor Terellin wanted to avoid. *I can't have a gerbil, but you let someone walk their cow?*

The cord proved as unnecessary as Zylas had claimed, but Collins continued the charade. The other professors and students already marveled at the close bond he shared with the dog who had run for help while he lay, seriously wounded, on the laboratory floor. Collins' sudden ability to speak every human language had confounded his doctors, who had plied him with CT scans and MRIs, none of which had revealed anything abnormal. *Apparently, magic doesn't show up on X-ray.* One more eccentricity would likely push him over the edge from a curiosity to an object of aversion. Students tended to tolerate diversity, so long as it had a logical and rational basis.

Collins continued through the dark toward Daubert Laboratories, willing the hulking buildings to pass by more swiftly. The walk seemed longer than usual, the sidewalk harder, the buildings less friendly. It all passed in a dim blur of light and shadow that little resembled the cheery, student-filled pathways of Algary's days and evenings. The clop of Falima's hooves echoed strangely between the buildings.

A security guard approached, gave a habitual cheery wave, then stopped short. He waited for Collins to reach him.

Though tempted to veer away, Collins kept to the concrete walkway. Anything else would appear suspicious. "Good morning," he said.

"Good morning." The stout, dour-faced guard studied the horse. "Interesting companions you have there."

"It's a horse." Collins stated the obvious, so as not to appear to be hiding anything. As if *I could stuff a horse under my shirt*. He followed the security guard's gaze with his own, only to notice a red eye peering through the inky curtain of Falima's mane. *Damn it, Zylas, I told you to stay in the pack*. Suddenly, Collins realized the man had said companions, plural. *Did he see Zylas?* He tried to come up with a plausible explanation for a lab rat crawling freely over an unperturbed horse.

"Arid a dog," the guard added, as if in answer to Collins' concerns. His attention turned to the patchy hound, whose tail flopped back and forth like an overwound pendulum.

"The dog's mine. Name's Korfius."

The guard's gaze returned to the horse.

Glowering at Zylas, Collins answered the unspoken question. "I'm taking her to the lab." This time, he spoke the truth, though he made no attempt to avoid the implication that he intended to use her in experiments.

The guard grunted. "You wouldn't be planning some sort of practical joke, now, would you, kid?"

Collins gave the only answer anyone would, whether or not he intended such a thing. "No."

"Can I see your ID?"

Collins didn't fight, seeing no reason to prolong the encounter with argument. Preferring the guard's focus to remain on him rather than the animals, he took his wallet from his pocket and presented his graduate student identification card.

The guard took it from him. "'Collins," he murmured. "Benton Collins." He handed it back to Collins. "Now why does that sound familiar?"

Collins replaced the card and his wallet. "I'm the one who got heat up in the lab a year and a half ago at Thanksgiving."

The guard snapped his fingers. "Right. We took a lot of flak for that."

Collins said nothing. Surely, the man would not blame him for being the victim of an apparent assault.

Again, the man looked at Korfius. "So this must be the critter who saved you."

"Yes," Collins said. "He is." He let his brows inch upward. "May I please go now? I'd like to get this horse set up in time to grab some breakfast."

With obvious reluctance, the guard stepped aside. Collins continued down the pathway more quickly now, hoping to make it to the portal without running into anyone else. That realization brought an ironic smile to his lips. *The portal What's my hurry? Do I really need to rush to a place where the people in power want me dead?* The idea seemed insanity. He had never sought out as simple a thrill as bungee jumping, and he did not relish the thought of repeating his last encounter in Barakhai. *The insanity is that I've even agreed to come this far.*

The oblong shape of Daubert Laboratories came into view, and Collins loosed a pent up breath. He raced for the most obscure side entrance, the horse trotting happily along behind him. Farthest from the main rooms and experiments, it would provide fewer opportunities for chance encounters with students or professors. Only as he hurried up the concrete stairs to the peeling, green-painted door did he remember that, for this way in, he needed a key. He fumbled at his waist, hoping he had left his jumble of keys clipped to a belt loop by habit. As usual, his beeper pinched the fabric at his left hip, the keys just in front of his right. He unfastened the metal clip, found the biggest key by feel and inserted it into the lock. It snapped to the open position. He twisted the knob and shouldered the panel inward. The mingled

odors of mustiness, animal dander, cleaners, and wood chips filled his nose.

Falima whickered, apparently recognizing the scent as the pathway home, and Zylas scabbled back to Collins' shoulder. "We're here?"

"We'd better be." Collins stepped inside and held the door open for Falima and Korfius. "Otherwise, you just earned me a one-way ticket to Bellevue."

The limitations of the translation spells kicked in. "What?"

Collins shook his head. "Never mind." He closed the door behind the animals, out of habit listening for the click of its locking.

Zylas squeaked into Collins' ear, "We didn't need a key to get out."

"You wouldn't have." Collins watched Falima continue forward, hooves clattering against tile. She moved easily despite the odd sounds, which surprised him. He had spent an anxious half hour urging her across the castle drawbridge in Barakhai and now had to guess that embedded formica had a more solid sound or feel than overair planking. "The main door's never locked. I brought us in a different way."

Korfius raised his nose, sniffing wildly, then running to Collins.

Accepting Collins' explanation, Zylas turned to some-thing he understood. "Korfius associates the smell of this place with you."

Now that Zylas had spoken it aloud, the dog's behavior seemed obvious. "Not surprising. I practically live here." It seemed unlikely they would find anyone in the building this time of the morning, but Collins could not discount the possibility of a cleaning crew. He hurried his animal companions down the hallway to the class-turned-storage room that led to Barakhai.

Sparse light funneled in the doorway to reveal the jumbled desks, chairs, and boxes Collins remembered from his last visit to Barakhai. Then, sunlight swimming through dust motes had given the appearance of smoke; but the current hour just made it seem ghostly dark. The strange equations remained, white figures dancing across the chalkboard, and Collins could just discern the purple chalk pentagram scrawled across the tile.

Zylas scrambled to the floor. "Let's go."

Collins studied Falima doubtfully. Her solid, golden body had to weigh at least half a ton, and her head towered over his own 5'11".

Zylas followed Collins' gaze and divined his question. "She made it in; she can make it out." He flitted beneath a desk.

Collins shrugged. The rat/man had a seemingly undeniable point, but Collins knew the loophole. He could leave his world for Barakhai through the portal, but no one in human form had ever passed from there to here. If the magic could make such seemingly impossible and random distinctions, perhaps it could make the path in more difficult than the one out of Barakhai. Deciding the pain of watching a friend struggle outweighed curiosity, he followed his albino companion.

Worried about the effect of mixing technology with the active magic of the portal, Collins did not attempt to use his mag light as they crawled through dark debris for what seemed like an hour. At first, Collins' backpack banged against the stacked furniture, and he heard an avalanche of cardboard boxes. Falima gave an occasional snort but otherwise handled the low scramble well. Soon, he heard her steady hoofbeats behind him, no longer moving at an unnatural shuffle, and he realized she could stand. Last time, he had assumed himself still amid the debris and had crawled much longer than necessary. This time, he rose, though he found himself keeping one hand hovering at the level of his forehead, guarding against the imagined junk that had last filled his vision. Barely needing to dip his head at any point, Korfius padded along beside him. Zylas continued to lead the way effortlessly, his white fur the only thing

visible in the otherwise blinding gloom. Anything that could inconvenience a rat would surely thwart any of his companions.

Then, the world began to brighten. Moonlight filtered through an opening that had once held a wooden door, revealing a crumbling ruin of a stone room. Through the gap, Collins could see a world that currently resembled his own, at least in regard to time of day. Stars sprinkled the sky, with a slight grayness that hinted of coming dawn. The rat stared ahead as Collins and Korfius emerged.

"Uh-oh," Zylas said.

Collins stared through his wire-rimmed glasses at a sea of men milling outside the ruins, dressed in the familiar silver and aqua of King Terrin's guards.

## Chapter 2

THROUGH the doorway of the ruins, Collins looked down on a sea of royal aqua and white. The soldiers in front stood in regimented lines, their uniforms unadorned, their mail pristine, and their heads bare. Their hair ranged from snowy-white to ebony, and their skin spanned nearly as broad a range. Most clutched spears and some carried swords through the wide black sashes that served as belts. Dogs of myriad shapes, colors, and sizes meandered through the troops or stood attentively among the men. Toward the back, the mounted soldiers wore iron helms and the white portions of their uniforms bore a spattering of stretched, blue-green clovers.

"Damn," Collins said, his awed and nervous expletive no louder than Zylas' grossly understated, "Uh-oh."

Collins added carefully, "We're in an almighty colossal shit load of trouble." He waited for his friend to contradict him, to assure him that the renegades had expected and planned for this confrontation, but Zylas gave him nothing.

The front line leveled its spears. "Halt!" a commander yelled at Collins and his friends. "No one move."

"Zylas?" Collins implored in a desperate whisper. His animal companions, he knew, had an out. They could race back through the magical portal and hope none of the guards in their horse or dog forms dared to follow. *And leave me in Weirdoland to face an army alone.* The idea seemed reprehensible, yet Collins turned to seal his fate. At least, Falima and Korfius, the woman and the child, should seize what little security they still had.

Korfius crouched, growling deep in his throat. Falima rummaged through the debris in woman form, as naked as a newborn and no more self-conscious.

Collins groaned, the irony clear even through rising dread. At their darkest hour, every companion but Korfius had been caught in his smallest, weakest form, *It's up to me.* He glanced out over the horde, at least a hundred strong. *And I'm not going to win by overpowering them.* He considered his possessions, hoping he had included some object he could use to shock and intimidate the soldiers. He dared not make a motion large enough to unslung his backpack. Instead, his hand strayed to his pocket, sifting through loose change and lint. No simple parlor trick, no random display of technology, would work here. One of the king's advisers, Carrie Quinton, came from his world; and the soldiers already knew that Collins did, too.

Before Collins could think to do anything, Falima charged past him with a bellow of fury, brandishing a stick in each hand.

"No!" Collins threw himself at the woman, missed, and rolled through the doorway toward the massed soldiers. Clearly surprised, they withdrew, and two fell beneath Falima's crazed assault. Korfius dove for another, driving him to the ground before several dogs closed in on the writhing man and dog.

"No!" Collins yelled. "Stop it." Still hoping to find something significantly exciting to astonish the warriors, he thumbed the test button on the beeper clipped to his belt and whipped the wheel toward maximum volume. Its squeal shrilled over the din.

The combatants hesitated, and all eyes jerked to Collins. Fine, *you did it. Now what?*

An enormous object blotted out the moonlight.

Instinctively, Collins ducked and swung his attention upward. A huge, shadowy figure filled the sky. Terror surged through him, and the urge to flee became an all encompassing necessity. He ran mindlessly, no longer worrying about the menace of the guards, hearing their screams and pounding footsteps meld with the more familiar screech of his beeper. Something heavy cut the air above his head. Without warning, a whirlwind sucked him off his feet, sending him spiraling to the ground. He struck a stone with enough force to drive the breath from his lungs, then found himself tumbling down a steep, grassy hill without the barest sense of control. The world spun past in a dizzying array of greens and browns. Something leathery slapped his ear, pounding pain through his head. Then a calm voice touched his mind. *\*Be still.\**

Though it violated any shred of logic, Collins tried to obey. He felt something pierce the upper back of his T-shirt, scraping furrows of skin from his neck. His feet left the ground, and he dangled dangerously over rocks as the earth disappeared below him. Soldiers scattered in all directions, their ranks broken, their movements frenzied and random. Collins found himself whipping violently upward through the trees, the front of his collar chewing into his throat, choking off his screams and most of his breathing. "Help!" he rasped out.

Collins' rational mind gradually caught up to reality. *A flying animal the size of a school bus has me in its claws.* Only one creature fit that description. *Prinivere.* Collins fought a desperate battle for sane and logical understanding. *We're safe.* He savored that thought for less than a moment, when an abrupt turn sent him flying toward a clump of trees. The rolled cotton bit deeper into his windpipe, cutting off his oxygen supply, and branches slashed his bare arms. He seized his collar with both hands, wrenching it forward with all his strength. The fabric gave only slightly, and a trickle of air wheezed into his spasming lungs. "Help," he managed again, his hoarse, quiet voice lost in the swirl of wind raised by flapping, batlike wings. Then he remembered the dragon's nonverbal communication. *You're strangling me!* He tried to send the thought directly at her. *I'm going to die!*

*\*Sorry,\** Prinivere sent back. *\*Brace for a change.\** Without further explanation, she wrapped a claw around Collins' right upper arm and released her grip on his shirt.

For an instant, Collins dangled sideways, Prinivere's long claws digging painfully into his flesh. He caught a woozy view of the trees far below him, and sudden terror conjured an image of him plummeting hundreds of feet to a shattered and painful death that made strangulation seem preferable. Then, another claw closed over his left arm, and the balance allowed for a lighter hold.

*Thank you.* Collins filled the sending with genuine gratitude. Now that falling no longer seemed likely, just being able to breathe felt like an extraordinary gift, coupled with the fading of the pain in his neck and arm. He could still feel the scratches, but the sharp constancy of a deeply entrenched claw had disappeared.

Finally in control of his no-longer reeling senses, Collins worried for his companions. *Falima? Zylas? Korfius?*

*\*On my back,\** Prinivere responded. *\*All safe.\**

Collins flushed, wondering why he was the only one who had panicked, forgetting Prinivere could read the intention of thoughts as well as verbatim sendings.

*\*You weren't alone. Zylas and Falima just have more experience with me, and I grabbed Korfius before you. I figured once he ran, I'd never catch him.\**

The trees now seemed a million miles below Collins, swaying wildly. He tried to pretend he was riding on a skyway at an amusement park, but he could not trick his senses into trusting the security of wheels, wires, and pulleys. Prinivere did not follow the straight path the illusion required, and nothing secured him should her grip fail, should someone shoot her down with spears and arrows, should her aged strength simply give way. *It's out of my hands.* Collins screwed his eyes tightly closed. He would live or die by Prinivere's skill, and he had little choice but to trust it.

The flight spanned a heart stopping eternity, air cutting around Collins and roaring painfully through his ears, the dragon surging and gliding, wings slapping air like shaken leather blankets. At length, she spiraled downward, and Collins dared at last to open his eyes. His vision was suddenly filled with rugged mountains poking through a vast, green forest. Prinivere sent a message more concept than words, urging him to watch for limbs and other dangers. Then, they plunged into the forest. Branches tore at Collins' bare arms and tangled into his hair. Something sharp poked his jeans at the left thigh but did not penetrate the tough cotton. Prinivere made a swaying and bumpy landing onto a rocky prominence, stretched her wings, then folded them gingerly against her sides. Balanced on her hind legs, she released Collins gently to his feet.

Collins scrambled aside, worried that a weary or accidental gesture of a wing or claw might put him into harm's way. The quick movement stole the last of his already shaky equilibrium, and he crashed to the ground, rolling over stones that jabbed into his hack and sides. He came up on his knees. The outcropping overlooked forest that seemed to stretch on forever, even blanketing the lower peaks. The ledge Prinivere had chosen sheltered only a few scraggly weeds and twisted, low-slung saplings that resembled bonsai trees. The world was bathed in a flat, steely gray that usurped all color. Dull and lifeless, it reminded Collins how much, and how soon, he wanted to go home.

Falima clambered from the dragon's scaly back. Korfius bounded after her, tongue lolling and tail wagging.

Collins felt obligated to say something, but words failed him. "Wow."

"Wow, indeed." Falima approached the old dragon with obvious concern. "Are you all right?"

Prinivere's enormous, toothy mouth pulled into a grin. Once again, Collins marveled at how much the biologically impossible creature resembled a dinosaur: long-necked and long-legged, covered in greenish-black scales with plates jutting from neck, back, and tail. Scars marred a hide that seemed to glow, and the tail ended in a ragged cut. She walked on four legs, despite the fibrous wings that, though massive, should not be capable of supporting a body so huge. Black ears pricked upward, triangular like a horse's; and her eyes sparkled like emeralds recessed deeply into dark-rimmed sockets. Each forelimb ended in three toes with sharp, curved talons, while the hind legs sported four toes apiece. The short-coupled body fit well with a blocky snout that ended in arched and slitty nostrils. *\*I'm fine,\** she sent, apparently to everyone. *\*Stop fretting over me.\**

Collins doubted the dragon was responding solely to Falima's inquiry. He had worried only for his own life, but his companions had clearly targeted more concern toward Prinivere's welfare.

"Never, my lady." Zylas' squeaky voice came from farther along the outcropping, though Collins had not seen him dismount.

Collins rose and headed toward the rat. As fear ebbed, he grew more irritated. "You could have



warned me we'd be facing spears and hitching a ride on a dragon."

"Why?" Zylas paced in a semicircle, looking up at Collins through one red eye. "Would you have come to Barakhai if I had?"

"No," Collins admitted, suspicions blossoming and anger with them. It was not the first time Zylas had tricked him to Barakhai. "Are you saying you hid—"

"He's just playing with you," Falima interrupted, giving the explanation that Zylas should have. "The soldiers surprised us, too. The king must have mobilized that force quickly. I'm guessing some spy saw us going into the ruins and decided to meet us there when we came out."

She did not have to mention that, had they taken less time convincing Collins to join them, the army could not have massed in wait.

"My lady," Zylas said, turning his attention back to the dragon. "They've seen you! You should not have risked yourself."

*\*Nonsense! Zylas. I have as much to gain from this as anyone. Perhaps more.\**

Zylas did not argue, though the frown that scored Falima's face suggested that she wanted him to. Collins considered the point. The elderly dragon was already living on borrowed time and had little personal stake in any project. On the other hand, she had little to lose either.

Prinivere lumbered around to face the group. *\*We also have spies. When Aisa brought me the news, I hurried there as fast as I could.\** She pronounced the new name like the continent in Collins' world.

Zylas scrambled a few feet farther. "My lady, it's best to get you under cover."

Prinivere's huge head bobbed up and down wearily. She gave no thought-spoken reply, at least not one she allowed Collins to hear, but she did move along the ledge toward the rat/man. She could convey her communication to as many or as few listeners as she wished.

A moment later, Zylas disappeared into the weeds.

Collins hesitated, Falima at his side and Korfius at his heels. "Who's Aisa?"

Prinivere headed after Zylas, and Falima strode in the dragon's wake. "Another renegade. You'll meet her soon. If she fetched Prinivere, she must be here. And Ijidan, too. He takes care of this place."

Collins watched Prinivere push through an overhang of vines, which seemed to swallow her massive form. Apparently, a cave lay beyond the entwined cascade of greenery. He could not help marveling at the hiding places the renegades managed to find. The last time, they had kept him in the underground burrows of the outcast skunks, the garbage men of Barakhai. Their musk had foiled the ability of the guard hounds to track them. This cave, well-camouflaged and perched amid dangerous mountain peaks, could only be accessed by strong-winged birds and the most surefooted of mountain goats. And, of course, Prinivere.

When Collins followed his companions into the cave, he discovered an enormous, craggy room with several storage trunks, a fire pit, and a bed of straw. Prinivere, he knew, had simple tastes that defied the role-playing game image of dragons perched upon vast hordes of gold, jewels, gemstones, and magical treasures. A squirrel hunched on one of the chests, worrying a nut clutched between its forepaws. Beside it, a blue-and-gold macaw watched them, its head low and its feathers ruffled. Despite its calm demeanor, the parrot looked flamboyantly out of place, the royal cobalt feathers of its wings, tail, and back appearing dyed and the brilliant yellows of its belly just as unnatural. A patch of ivory skin surrounding the eyes and nostrils held black stripes composed of miniature feathers all leading to a wickedly curved, ebony beak.

Prinivere collapsed into the straw, clearly exhausted. Whatever magical powers the crystal Collins had stolen enhanced, it did not, apparently, increase her physical stamina. *Or does it?* Collins realized the ancient dragon could never have flown so far before, especially carrying several passengers on her back. She had never actually fought the king's guards. They appeared to have succumbed to the same frantic, not wholly irrational, fear that gripped Collins whenever he encountered Prinivere. But she had managed to fly him and his companions into the mountains, a feat she could not have managed the last time Collins had come to Barakhai.

Once again, the dragon responded to Collins' meandering thoughts. *\*I can use magic to boost my energy temporarily, but the spell runs its course.\**

Collins appreciated the knowledge; though the realization that she could read his every intention made him feel creepy and a bit violated. *At least, she trusts me, which suggests I really am the good person I try to be. No wonder Zylas puts such implicit faith in her judgment.* Suddenly understanding Prinivere must have received that thought, too, Collins felt his cheeks warm. He tried to redirect his mind, which only made him more self-conscious.

Zylas clambered up the side of the trunk to the squirrel and parrot. He addressed them at a volume that did not allow Collins to overhear.

Korfius ran around the cave, snuffling at every corner.

Falima assumed the job of hostess. "Ben, this is Aisa." She gestured at the macaw, who bobbed her head. She raised her left claw, opening and closing it intermittently. "Hello, Ben," she squawked.

Collins had seen a scarlet macaw at a local fair perform the same welcoming wave. He cleared his throat, this time avoiding the natural urge to use his "baby talk" voice. Though the parrot's greeting had seemed childlike, she might have the present mentality of a bird, a grown woman, or anywhere in between. "Hello, Aisa."

Falima finished, "And this is Ijidan." She indicated the squirrel. "The caretaker of this cave."

Ijidan flicked his bushy tail and stopped eating.

Zylas scurried up Collins' pants, then his shirt, to settle on his shoulder. "Aisa has decent overlap and the rare ability to speak our human tongue in switch form."

Collins nodded. The development of overlap, he knew, had to do with the amount of time spent as an animal, some natural talent, and practice. He had no means to gauge Aisa's bird age, but he guessed she would prove to be mature when she took her woman shape. It made sense that a parrot might have a propensity for remembering things between forms, given that they seemed highly intelligent. He had watched a television special in which African grays verbally identified objects, placed shapes into their proper holes, and sorted toys by size and color.

"She's one of our few *Regulars*," Zylas continued, using a term Collins remembered from his last visit to Barakhai. It meant her parents were also macaws, having bred in either human or animal form. If parents who assumed different creature forms created offspring in human form, their progeny would take the animal form of the mother for the first thirteen years, then become something ostensibly random. "Both her parents were *Randoms*, though, lucky enough to find one another and commiserate."

Apparently, Falima overheard Zylas. "Made a lot easier by the fact that they were cousins."

That made sense to biology-trained Collins. At least some of the propensity of *Randoms* to assume a certain animal form seemed to have a classical multifactorial inheritance pattern, as evidenced by Zylas and his late wife, both distant descendants of Prinivere, producing a daughter who became a dragon.

Zylas continued as if Falima had not interrupted. "The big advantage being that she's not registered."

Collins' brows beetled as he considered Zylas' words. "Registered?"

"Registered," Zylas said again, as if simple repetition could work as explanation. "*As a Random.*"

Collins still did not understand.

Falima took over. "Remember how we told you the king's men attend all coming-of-age ceremonies?"

Collins nodded, deliberately avoiding Zylas' stare. When the rat's daughter had turned thirteen, revealing her new animal form, royal soldiers had taken her and killed the mother who tried to stop them.

"And that it's because the law states that obligate carnivores must be summarily executed."

Collins could not forget. "The king said that, before the law, those carnivores murdered an average of six people before they got caught." He waited for his companions to correct him, to expose the king as an evil liar.

Falima only shrugged. "That may be true."

Zylas fidgeted on Collins' shoulder.

Collins tried to shift the focus of the discussion a bit. "Last I knew, the king had issued a ban on *all Random* breedings." He turned his gaze to Aisa, who remained quietly perched, listening to the conversation but adding nothing. He wondered just how much she understood. The squirrel flitted around and up the box at lightning speed, nails skittering, objects shifting and slapping back into place as he moved.

Falima confirmed, "That law just went into effect. The royals gave it enough time to assure that all the women already pregnant with *Random* offspring could safely and legally bear their children."

It surprised and irritated Collins that the king chose to mitigate his new law with reason and apparent kindness. Collins wanted to hate King Terrin, to see him as a consummate villain as unequivocally evil as Cinderella's stepmother or Osama bin Laden. But, in all his dealings with Barakhai's king, Collins had found the man likable and logical. He only disagreed with two of the king's decisions. The first was choosing to execute innocent children barely into their teens even before they committed any crime because of the misfortune of transforming into a meat eater. The second was the king's decree against *Random* unions, which seemed little more than genocide through breeding. According to Zylas and Falima, the royal family planned to do away with "undesirable" animals, such as vermin, snakes, and certain types of carnivores, all of which were already forbidden, by previous laws, from *Regular* breeding.

"Anyway," Zylas said, returning to the original point. "At coming-of-age, *Randoms* are registered in a large book. It all looks rather special and important to the child and families, but it's just an elaborate way for the royals to keep track of us."

Without warning, Ijidan made a flying leap from the box to Collins' chest. The squirrel scampered to Collins' unoccupied shoulder, then along his left arm, leaving a line of pale scratches with each skittish movement.

"What the hell?" Collins finally managed, watching the animal scamper over his clothing and flesh indiscriminately. When Ijidan held still long enough, he ran a hand along the soft, grizzled fur. "Does he have to do that?"

Aisa let out a loud squawk. "Just checking you over."

Collins jumped at the sound, heart pounding, and the sudden movement sent the squirrel scurrying over him for another pass. This time, the animal sprang back to the box when it finished.

Collins found himself missing Ialin, their previous companion, a hummingbird/man who had despised him. At least, Ialin's actions had seemed comprehensible, after a time, and his noises weren't ear shattering. "Where's Min?"

Falima's gaze followed Ijidan, and she smiled, apparently reading the barb beneath Collins' otherwise innocent question. "He's spying. Didn't think you'd care if you saw him again."

Collins made a wave of dismissal. In truth, he did not care, though he still thought the tiny man's mature quietness would trump anything Aisa or Ijidan had to offer. *What am I doing? This is insane.* He thought about the greeting the king's men had given them. Now they knew Collins had returned to Barakhai, and they knew about the dragon. Even with the crystal, Prinivere's magic was severely limited by her advanced age. The shabby band of renegades had lost their one other advantage: surprise. The king, on the other hand, still had money, power, an army of trained and armed guards, and Carrie Quinton.

Collins pictured the woman, a genetics postgraduate who had originally come from his own world and now served as an adviser to King Terrin. Once, Collins had slept with her, and he found himself easily picturing the smooth curves, her cascade of naturally golden hair, her long legs and large firm breasts. She had the face of a model. *Had*, he reminded himself, wincing. When he had stolen the crystal she wore as a necklace, inadvertently cutting her neck with it, she had turned on him. To escape the swords of the guards, he had thrust a torch into her face. His last glimpse of her was with her hair aflame, her screams echoing through the stairwell.

Collins shook off the memory. He had also burned the king's brother, and he knew he would die, and die horribly, if the royals caught him. This isn't *a game; home or in Barakhai, dead is forever. We escaped once by the grace of a dragon. Next time, it may not go so well.* He glanced at Prinivere, who lay still with her head on her forelegs, eyes closed. Exhaustion weighed heavily on her, but Collins had to test Zylas' promise. "I want to go home. Now."

Falima looked stricken. Zylas said nothing, but he rubbed his thin, pink ears with a paw. Prinivere opened one enormous, green eye and rolled her attention to Zylas, still perched on Collins' shoulder.

Driven by his need to know exactly where he stood, Collins demanded, "I want to go home right now."

"Please..." Falima started, stayed by a tired wave of the dragon's claw.

\*Come,\* Prinivere sent to Collins. *\*I will send you back.\**

Certain his companions would use the dragon's fatigue as an excuse to delay his return, Collins stammered out, "Y-you will?"

The dragon's expression did not waver, but she did open her other eye. *\*Of course, I will. I would not ignore Zylas' promises. Such a thing would dishonor us both.\**

Collins glided toward the dragon, shaking. Though he knew she was old, feeble, and had no intention of harming him, he still suffered from a deep instinctive fear.

Prinivere continued as he approached, *\*Last time, we brought you here under false pretenses and kept you with trickery. If you choose to help us this time, it must be of your own free will, because of the goodness in your own heart.\**

Collins cringed. Her final pronouncement, though delivered without emotion, cut deeply. He liked his Barakhain friends, agreed with their mission, and wanted them to accomplish their worthy goal. He also knew that they needed him in order to succeed. Sighing, he lowered his head. *They're risking their lives for their own futures and those of their children. What do I have to gain from this?* It was a bitterly selfish question. *If I could save the lives of thousands of children in my own world by sacrificing myself, I would do it. Why are the children of Barakhai worth less?* Though he saw the flaw in his own question, Collins still paused. *Because it's not a sure thing. I could die, and the Barakhains could still keep their curse, their king, and all that goes with them.*

Suddenly remembering that Prinivere received all of his thoughts, Collins looked at her fiercely. She

lay in place, expression impassive, eyes nonjudgmental. It was a quandary he had to face alone, but he wished someone would say something to sway him either way.

Finally, Prinivere did.\* *Wouldn't you like to stay until Korfius changes? So you can talk to him, I mean?\**

It was as good an excuse as any to put off a difficult decision. Collins glanced around for his dog, finding him lying on the floor near the mouth of the cave chewing on a dangling vine. "Good idea," he said. Thinking back, he knew that Zylas became a man at noon, Korfius a boy two hours later, then Prinivere became a woman about an hour after that. When he had set his watch by Zylas' switch time, Korfius changed at 2:00 p.m. and Prinivere at 3:00 p.m. Because they were *Regulars*, Korfius and Prinivere spent less time in human form than the others, who split their time exactly half and half.

"In the meantime," Falima suggested carefully, rolling her gaze from Prinivere to Zylas to Collins as if waiting for one of them to silence her again, "maybe we could explain why we brought you. Then you can make an informed decision."

That sounded like a good idea to Collins. He nodded. "All right." He crossed the cave to sit on one of the chests not already occupied by a parrot or squirrel. "Go."

Zylas jumped from Collins' shoulder to the wood, displaying none of Ijidan's grace. "The lady—" he gave a nod toward the dragon to acknowledge her "—warned us that she would probably not prove strong enough to work the crystal to its full potential."

*\*Remember, it took two healthy young males to place the curse.\**

Collins remembered. The half-dragon twins of an ancient princess, embittered by their lot, had cursed all but select members of the royal family to spend part of their lives in animal form. Or, in the case of the dragons, in human form. In revenge, the dragons had slain the boys, only to find themselves hunted to extinction. Only Prinivere remained, still bearing the scars of wounds the hunters had believed mortal and the missing tail that had won them their bounty.

*\*The crystal is powerful, but my magic and vigor have dwindled too far. Zylas tells me there are two other dragons. Young ones.\** Prinivere's sending contained a desperate hopefulness directed at Collins. He had told Zylas about the dragons, having learned of their existence from Carrie Quinton. One was surely Zylas' daughter. The other was a *Random* claimed by the king, as was his right, for execution as a dangerous carnivore. Apparently, it was male, as Quinton had talked excitedly of breeding them.

Collins shrugged. "I didn't see them with my own eyes, but I believe the person who told me about them."

"Carriequinton," Zylas supplied,

Falima shifted restlessly from foot to foot, then dug at the cave floor with a heel. At length, she looked up and, noticing all eyes upon her, added, "She doesn't care much for you, Ben."

Collins pursed his lips. "Not surprising." He dodged Falima's gaze, hoping she did not know he had slept with Quinton. At the time, it had seemed natural, given how much they had in common and how he planned to get them both permanently back to their world having lived an intense experience that no one seemed likely to believe. "How badly did I hurt her?"

"Her face," Zylas squeaked, hiding his whiskery nose behind a paw. "Let's just say she's not beautiful any more."

Falima added, "It's a woman thing, but I think you hurt her heart, too. And not just from the pain of losing her looks. She seems to think you... betrayed her."

Collins sucked his lips all the way into his mouth. Quinton had grown up in a series of foster homes, bitter about her drug-addicted mother, which seemed to have warped her sense of emotional attachment.

After just their one time in bed, she had imagined an entire life for them together. "She *really* hates me."

No one denied or confirmed the words, the ultimate affirmation.

Aisa squawked, and Collins jumped, wondering if he could ever get used to her doing that. *Not that I need to, but the others do.*

Zylas seized on the interruption. "In any case, we've searched the whole world for those dragons, without success. There seems to be only one place left to look." He lifted his head to Collins, who figured it out with ease.

"The royal quarters." It made sense that, if they needed Collins again, it would be to enter the areas of the kingdom warded against switchers.

"Right," Aisa corroborated in her parrot voice, apparently following at least part of the conversation.

Collins doubted the king would keep dragons in his bedchambers. "Maybe there aren't any dragons. Maybe Carrie gave me wrong information."

Falima perched delicately on the opposite edge of the chest. "No. There are dragons. We started searching as soon as you told us about them and, early on, found some dragon signs deep in the castle dungeons."

"We?" Collins pressed.

"Spies," Zylas detailed. "Including myself. I definitely smelled my daughter's scent, though none of us ever saw her. The king must have moved them soon after our raid, and no one managed to follow their trail, now long cold. It's almost as if—she disappeared." Mist covered his beady eyes, and Collins read pain there. Zylas would not beg or deceive this time. He clearly had taken Collins' anger to heart and trusted Collins' previous claim that, if he had only known the facts, he still would have helped and would have proved better at it.

Such consideration seemed worth rewarding. It pleased Collins that someone had listened so intently to his words and followed them to the letter. *Zylas is a real friend.* He wondered if he had ever truly known another. The rat/man clearly had practice at treating others well, never leading from the rear but placing himself in the same, or worse, danger as his followers. "So," Collins said, "all I have to do is look through the royal bedchambers again."

Apparently missing the sarcasm, Falima said brightly, "That's it."

And Zylas continued in the same upbeat vein. "If you find them, we'll figure out a way to rescue them when you get hack."

"Oh," Collins said, glancing between his companions to see if they completely missed the obvious or were just better than he was at nonchalantly stating the impossible. "So I don't actually have to retrieve these dragons. Just look for them."

Falima's smile seemed genuine, filled with joy at having Collins seriously consider the mission so soon after demanding to leave. "Right."

"In the king's warded bedchamber."

"Right."

Collins blinked. "Okay. That all seems simple enough." He hardened his tone to make it clear he believed they'd all gone mad. "So long as you ignore the fact that I have to sneak onto the castle grounds, into the castle itself, and to the king's own bedchamber past a zillion guards and other royal employees all of whom... *want to personally inflict on me the death of a thousand tortures.* Or something worse." He threw up his hands in disgust. "Are you crazy?"

Zylas' head swung toward Prinivere, who had obviously communicated with him alone. Then he

addressed Collins. "Did I forget to mention you'd be disguised?"

Collins continued to stare in disbelief. "That was implied, but I don't think a little grease paint and a haircut are going to fool anyone this time."

Prinivere finally gave a sending to Collins. *\*He means disguised by magic.\**

At last, Collins began to understand. "By magic?" It had nearly killed Prinivere to cast the spell that allowed Collins to understand their language, and Zylas had sworn not to let her risk herself like that again. "The crystal?" he wondered aloud.

*\*The crystal\** Prinivere confirmed. *\*I can make you look like one of the guards without harming myself. And another will go as your partner.\**

The nonverbal sending allowed Collins to understand that, by "your partner," she meant that whoever went with him would go in the guise of the guard's partner as well. He wondered what other spells Prinivere could now do that she could not previously manage but decided not to ask. It might violate some ethical protocol, which would greatly upset Zylas, who always insisted on proper etiquette and respect for the Lady. An instant later, he remembered that Prinivere could read his thoughts. She could choose to list her new abilities or to let him know if she would tolerate a direct questioning. "Who would this partner actually be?"

Zylas piped in at once. "Me."

"You?" Collins' brows shot up. "But you can't get into the royals' chambers."

"Nor can anyone else. That's why we brought you." The rat tilted his head into a pose probably supposed to appear brave, though it merely made him look quizzical. "I can get you there and back safely."

Falima wrung her hands. Clearly, she wanted to intervene, to keep Zylas out of harm's way. However, to do so would mean putting a lesser value on Collins' life.

"Can you guarantee that?" Although he knew better, Collins dared to hope.

Zylas' head glided back to its usual position. "Well, no, but... no one can ever..."

Collins forced a grin. "I was kidding."

"Oh. Well, then." Zylas' checks pulled across his muzzle into a ratty grin. It was a strange image, like a computer-animated commercial. "I'll do my best. I'm not going to run out on you."

Collins wondered if Zylas had actually used slang or if the spell simply translated it that way. *Spell or stone or both*, he reminded himself, only then recalling that he still had not pressed Zylas on the details of a question that had occurred to him way back in his own world. "So what happened to your translation stone?"

"I don't need it anymore." Zylas raised his head proudly.

Collins doubted the rat/man had suddenly learned all the languages of both worlds, along with every animal tongue. The spell Prinivere had cast on Collins interpreted only human languages, and they had told him the crystal Zylas always carried was unique. Collins jerked his gaze past the crates to where Prinivere once again rested with her eyes closed.

Zylas anticipated the question. "No, she can't cast a spell that works like my stone did. But she was able to remove the magic from its container and place it directly into me."

Collins saw the pros and cons of such a maneuver. It meant Zylas could never lose his precious artifact; but he also could not lend it out as he once had to Falima and Collins. And the magic died with him, an event that seemed inevitable given the power and reach of those who hunted him. Now in his forties, Zylas had given the royalty problems since his youth. On the other hand, the stone could no

longer be taken from Zylas or lost by him, and not having to carry it left his hands and mouth free. Zylas' value to the cause became wholly clear to Collins for the first time: a wise, bold, honest, and determined man with near-perfect overlap and a means to communicate with anyone in any form. Falima's instincts were right. The renegades could not afford to lose Zylas. "I'll do it," he said, the words out of his mouth before he could consider them. "But I can't take you as my partner."

Zylas' mouth dropped open, revealing his little pink tongue, and his crimson eyes bulged with distress and affront. "Why not?"

"Because they need you." Collins made a gesture that encompassed the entire cave. From the corner of his vision, he thought he saw the sleeping dragon smile.

Zylas dismissed the argument. "We need you, too. And you don't have any stake in this. I'm best-suited for the job, and I go."

Collins could not argue. He and Zylas did work well together, though he had to correct one thing. "Oh, I do have a stake in this. I, too, have loved ones suffering by the curse and the king's decree."

Zylas' determined look went instantly blank. "You do?"

Even before he had broken up with a girlfriend with whom he had little in common, Collins had had few close friends. Aside from Korfius, his life had only grown more empty. "You, you dim-witted quadruped. I mean you." He turned his gaze to Falima. "And others, here, too."

This time an unmistakable smile stretched the old dragon's face.

## Chapter 3

WHILE Prinivere slept and recovered from her excursion, Zylas reminded Collins of a castle layout he still vividly remembered. The grand structure towered five stories, topped by a crenellated rooftop fitted with ballistae and patrolled by guards. The four corner towers stretched another ten feet toward the sky, and Collins could not lose the memory of jumping from one of these, Zylas in his pocket, to a cart full of hay drawn hurriedly into place by goats secretly loyal to the renegades. The hay had barely cushioned his fall, and the cart had broken, leaving him a gashed and bloody mess with several broken bones and damaged internal organs. The basement held the dungeon, where Collins had spent a restless day and night while the castle staff waited for him to take a switch-form. The basement also reportedly contained food and wine cellars and storage rooms, though he had not seen them during his imprisonment.

The drawbridge across the moat led to two courtyards opening onto the ground floor, which held the kitchens and various workshops. Above those, the library and great dining hall were familiar to Collins. He had eaten a meal there and sneaked out, through the library, to search the uppermost floors. The third level reportedly held the servants' quarters. The guards slept in barracks, stables, and kennels in the inner courtyard. The superiors all had horse switch-forms, and the subordinates turned into dogs. In fact, Zylas had coopted Falima from a city guard force, and they had captured Korfius from that same force to keep him quiet after he found them on a hunt.

At some point during Zylas' description, Collins drifted into sleep. He came awake suddenly to find himself slumped over one of the wooden chests, his arm sticky with his own drool. Now in man form, Zylas conversed in soft tones with Prinivere, his voice an indecipherable rumble and hers, as usual, wholly



inaudible. At the end of the chest, Ijidan gnawed at a piece of orange fruit clutched between his paws while Korfius watched curiously from the ground. A short, heavysset woman prepared a dining table on one of the other chests. He saw no sign of Falima.

Collins rubbed the sleep seeds from his eyes, wondering how long he had slept. He still felt sluggish, though time would tell if that came of recently awakening or honest tiredness. From habit, he glanced at his watch, which read 10:42 and could not be right. For Zylas to have switched, it had to be after noon. He had missed his chance to set the time by Zylas' change, as he had done on his last visit. The modicum of light that found its way through the heavy curtain of vines told him little. "How long was I out for?" he asked with a yawn.

All of his companions glanced at him, but only Zylas answered. "Long enough to miss three people's switches."

Though self-evident and riot the information Collins had wanted, he did not press for more. The spell awkwardly translated their time system into units comprehensible to him, but he doubted they measured it the same way. Hours seemed to be the same length, as all the switch times he knew about occurred on an exact o'clock so long as he set his watch by one of them. The Barakhains just seemed more naturally in tune with time and its passage, not needing artificial conveyances, perhaps because they had to gauge more accurately. It would not do, for example, for Ijidan to become a man while clinging upside down chattering from some sky-high, finger-thin branch. "Yes, I see that. I'm sorry."

"I'm not." Zylas easily forgave the lapse, though he suffered most from the rudeness. "It means you're no longer upset, you're comfortable, and you've got the rest you need for the mission."

Comfortable was hardly the word Collins would have used, though he did not contradict. With a shrug that neither acknowledged nor disputed Zylas' claim, he headed toward the albino. Middle age coarsened features that had probably once been handsome. His ever present broad-brimmed hat shielded the almost-colorless blue eyes and skin wholly lacking pigment. Thin, white hair fell to his shoulders, perfectly matching the nearly invisible eyebrows and lashes.

"Lunch time," the woman at the chest called suddenly, her voice shrill.

Collins turned to see four plates piled with objects he could not yet identify. His stomach rumbled, and he realized he had missed breakfast. Graciously, he gestured at the dragon. "My lady?"

*\*You go ahead, please,\** Prinivere sent. *\*I'd rather wait a few hours and fill up in human form. It doesn't take as much.\**

Collins had never fully understood many of the details of the change, including digestion. He did not question Prinivere but drifted toward the makeshift table and the food it held. He realized the woman tending to lunch could only be Aisa, and her appearance surprised him. He had expected someone more like Ialin: thin, androgynous, and flitty. Aisa seemed like a perfectly normal thirty-something, with swarthy skin, finely detailed features, and a calm manner that seemed almost slow. Her only exoticisms were brilliant golden hair, short-coiffed, and steel blue eyes. She gestured him to a spot, and he sat, cross-legged, in front of it. He waited until Zylas joined him, then Aisa, and finally the squirrel, who leaped to his place but did not remain there long. Throughout their lunch, he skittered to and from the table, taking a nut or a raisin, then scampering to a safe place to eat it.

Korfius dived into a similar plate on the floor, eating it clean before Collins could do more than examine his own food. He discovered a mixture of nuts, dried fruit and vegetables, and shriveled bugs like those he might find on a windowsill. He picked out what he liked, particularly avoiding the insects, then looked to Aisa for conversation. "Prinivere would rather eat in the form that more easily fills her belly, and I got used to having a rat steal my food. I know Falima prefers to eat in human form. Am I right in assuming the smaller, lighter form is usually preferred when it comes to meals?"

"Not necessarily," Zylas said around a mouthful. "Depends on what the animal form eats, personal

preference." He swallowed. "Though it is her lighter form, Falima actually chooses to eat in human form as much as possible because a continuous diet of grass gets dull."

Aisa piped in. "And Zylas eats anything anytime in any form."

Zylas smiled, shoveling in another scoop of the mixture with a hand. "That's about right."

Collins crinkled his nose at the thought of what a rat might eat. "Do you prefer eating like a... well... like a bird?"

Aisa gave a small heave at the shoulders. "Have you ever eaten like a bird?"

"No," Collins admitted. "Is it hard?" He remembered his aunt's cockatiel working on an apple slice, its beak shaving off miniscule pieces while most of the fruit wound up on the cage floor.

Aisa took a drink. "Just constant. We eat just about our own weight in food every day." She set the mug aside. "Between flying and opening seeds, we still have trouble keeping up." She placed her free hand on the bulge of her belly. "Obviously, that's not a problem in human form. I forget and eat like a bird, then wind up heavier than I like."

Collins laughed.

Aisa looked affronted, and even Zylas gave Collins a glare.

"You know, Ialin uses so much energy and needs so much food in hummingbird form, he can starve to death in an hour."

"I'm sorry. I'm not laughing at Aisa or Ialin." Collins resumed picking through his food, separating out the bugs. "It's just that we have an expression where I come from. Eating like a bird means just pecking a few tidbits out of the plate. Eating very light." He laughed again. "Boy, do we have that backward."

Now, his companions smiled.

Zylas swallowed. "Your people wouldn't be as in tune with animals."

Korfius whined and flopped a paw on Collins' knee.

Collins scraped the tidbits he had selected from the rest of the food on his plate, then dumped the discards on the floor. Immediately, Korfius pounced upon them. "Oh, we're in tune with some animals. The ones we keep as pets."

Before Collins could take a bite of his own meal, Korfius had finished and placed his head on the man's thigh, begging more.

Collins' own words reminded him how much he looked forward to Korfius' transition, to the chance to ask the boy his preferences while in dog form. Korfius always seemed as happy as any dog, though smarter; but Collins worried that he might be missing some important need or desire. *Like being human sometimes?* He cringed at the thought of losing Korfius, though he would do whatever the dog/boy preferred... and like it. Absently, Collins dropped his hand to Korfius' head and scratched around and behind the floppy ears. The dog closed his eyes, in clear ecstasy.

Zylas watched the whole display as he cleaned his own plate. "I see that."

Aisa also studied Collins' every action, exploring other details. "You're not as skinny as Zylas and Falima described you, but I can see how you stay trim with Korfius around."

Collins just smiled, thinking it better not to explain that he usually did not give the lion's share of his dinner to his dog. He did not wish to risk insulting Aisa's meal preparation, as unappetizing as parts of it were to him. It made practical sense that a parrot would construct a mixed plate of seeds, pieces of fruit and vegetables, nuts, and small bugs, even in human form. "All dogs in my world eat like that."

"Ours, too," Zylas acknowledged. "But we common folk don't get to see them a lot, unless they

commandeer our larders in the name of the king."

Aisa made a sound, half-snort, half-squawk, that startled Ijidan. Dropping his nut, he sprang to a chest and scuttled across it to hide, flatly pressed, against the opposite side.

Collins thought back to the meal he had taken among the servants in the king's dining hall but could not specifically recall being able to distinguish the dog guards from the horses. At the time, his need to investigate the royal bedchambers without getting caught overcame idle curiosity. The system itself seemed to preclude manners given the communal serving bowls, lack of utensils, and stale bread slices used as plates. He did recall some eating their plates, soaked with the juices of the stew, and others slipping their sopping bread-plates to the dogs beneath the tables. Collins continued to scratch Korfius' head as he considered, then dropped that line of thought. More important matters took precedence. "So, when are we going to do this sneaking-in thing?"

Zylas sat back, folding his hands across his abdomen and exploring his teeth with his tongue. "I'm thinking tomorrow, immediately after I switch. That'll give me the most time to work before I have to worry about lapsing into switch-form in an inopportune place."

Collins nodded. "I could see how that might cause a problem." He could not imagine any disguise that might allow a rat to pass for a horse. "Isn't it more important to know when the guard you're impersonating changes?"

"Same times as me. That's why I'm the best one to go with you."

Collins suspected the coincidence was none at all. Likely, they had chosen which guard to pose as based on the timing of his switch. "And my guy? The one I'm supposed to be. When does he switch?"

Zylas glanced at Aisa, and they both smiled. "Perfect switch time."

Wondering about the private joke, Collins looked from woman to man and back. "What do you mean by perfect?"

"Eight in the morning," Zylas explained, and Collins appreciated that, this time, the translating spells turned the words the rat/man actually spoke into specific "clock" times he could understand. "And six in the evening. Human by day; animal by night. People would take some pretty daunting drugs to rebalance themselves to that schedule."

Collins recognized the two extra hours the guard spent in animal form, which confirmed him as a *Regular*. A *Random* would split the time equally in half. Though Zylas' description implied that the other guard spent half his time in each form, Collins believed that one a *Regular*, too. *Random* horses, like Falima, were exceedingly rare, and *Regulars* who preferred their human form often took herbs to become more like *Randoms* in this one regard. He even remembered the Barakhain word for them: *masuniat*. The *lesariat*, like Korfius preferred their animal forms. There was also a word for those who embraced the dual nature of their lives, seeing it as right and natural, but he could not recall it. "So," Collins guessed, "we go in when they're in animal form, so no one sees two Teds or Maxes."

"Orna and Narladin," Aisa corrected the names.

Zylas simply stared at Collins, brows rising in increments.

Collins flushed, realizing his mistake. "That wouldn't look suspicious or anything—guys running around as humans when they're supposed to be Lassie or Mr. Ed."

Zylas smiled, though, no matter the translation, he could not possible get the nuances of the joke. "Horses."

"So, we have to go in while Orion and Aladdin—"

"Orna and Narladin," Aisa restored the names again.

"—are in human form without raising suspicions from anyone who thinks he's seeing double."

"Essentially," Zylas left the table to sit cross-legged on the floor near Prinivere. "We'll have people keeping the real Orna and Narladin engaged and away from the castle."

Ijidan crawled cautiously across the chest, snatched a nut from Collins' plate, then ran with it. Becoming accustomed to animals in his food, Collins barely tracked the squirrel with his gaze. "So, these guys—"

Aisa interrupted again, "Man and woman."

Collins jerked his attention to the bird/woman. "What?"

"Orna is a woman," she explained.

Now Collins whipped his attention to Zylas. "You'd better be being the woman."

Zylas looked away.

"Aw, crap." Collins shook his head. "I have to be a woman?" He shook harder, sending his brown hair into disarray. "Why can't you be the woman?"

Zylas looked at Prinivere, who bowed her nose to his head. He looked back at Collins with a neutral expression, though his eyes sparkled with mirth. "Switch time," he reminded.

"We could work around that." Collins suspected they could, though it would unnecessarily complicate the matter.

Aisa let out an indignant snort. "What's wrong with being a woman?"

Collins backpedaled wildly. "Nothing at all—if you are one. But I don't know anything about being female." He threw up his hands. "Hell, if I understood women, I'd have one as a girlfriend." *Probably along with a Nobel peace prize.*

"Orna's known for being moody and somewhat standoffish," Zylas said.

That did not further endear the part he had to play to Collins. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's not supposed to *mean* anything. It's supposed to serve as an excuse for why you're not wasting time and energy trying to interact with other guards and servants when you need to keep focused on a secret mission."

*Good point.* Collins still felt suspicious of the role, and he looked anxiously to the dragon. "Are you going to actually turn me into a woman?"

*\*Only your face will resemble Orna's. That's as much as the spell can do. The rest you will have to... handle.\**

"Handle," Collins repeated aloud. So long as he avoided a communal bath, he saw no reason to do anything more than tape a few socks to his chest. He might not even need to do that. Athletic women tended to have boyish bodies, and his would definitely pass. "For how long will I have a woman's face?"

Prinivere fidgeted, which alarmed Collins. He had never before seen her reveal her discomfort.

"What?" he demanded, ignoring Zylas' frown. The rat/ man would not like the way his companion addressed the lady.

*\*We don't know,\** Prinivere admitted. *\*The others have lasted only until their change, but you.\**

"... don't change," Collins finished for her, terror creeping into his heart. His chest felt full. "You mean, I might have a girl face forever?"

*\*Not likely, but I can't say for sure.\**

Clearly still irritated with Collins' discomfort, Aisa muttered, "It would be an improvement."

*\*The illusion might not carry into your world.\**

The dragon's words did not soothe him. "The translation spell did."

*\*At the worst, I can make another illusion to restore your face.\**

At first repulsed by the idea, Collins forced himself to consider it. If the first mask took, he had no reason to think the second would not also. She might even be able to improve upon the original, to even out his ears, to enhance the chin and cheekbones, to widen eyes that tended to squint and add more green to the hazel.

*\*I can do all that,\** Prinivere sent, reading his thoughts again. *\*Though I don't know how long any of it might last.\**

Collins realized he would have a tough enough time explaining his new look without having to worry about it wearing off at some inconvenient time. Finding himself no longer hungry, he rose. His concern about a cross gender disguise seemed suddenly ludicrous compared to the Herculean task he had accepted. His reticence had to appear inexplicable to people who daily turned into creatures whose differences from their normal state went way beyond gender. "All right," he said in a resigned tone, accepting everything in two simple words that scarcely began to cover the situation. He was about to risk his life—again—for a cause in which he had no stake but the happiness of friends that, even if the plan worked perfectly, he might never see again.

The room itself seemed to huff out a relieved sigh. Korfius came to Collins for affection that the man delivered by petting. The normalcy of the interaction allowed Collins to forget the future for a few moments. He closed his eyes, his mind carrying him back to Algary campus where he sat on his bed stroking the dog, escaping only the familiar pressures of impending exams and assignments.

Korfius loosed a contented sigh, then whined softly, rose, repositioned his body, and settled beneath Collins' hand again. Wondering if the dog's restlessness stemmed from sensing his own discomfort, Collins sucked in a deep breath through his nose then exhaled it through his mouth, trying to blow away the tension. Korfius loosed a long whine that was almost a howl, filled with entrenched and inexplicable pain. The dog disappeared from beneath Collins' hand.

Collins cycled another calming breath, then opened his eyes. Korfius huddled in a dark corner of the cave, no longer a dog but a naked, shivering boy. A mop of blond hair fell around his heart-shaped, pale face; and he hugged his long, scrawny legs with arms equally so.

Aisa headed toward the boy, but Collins scrambled to get there first. No matter how inexperienced a comforter he was, he would be preferred. By skidding in front of Aisa, he did reach Korfius first, though the parrot/woman had to stumble backward to keep from running into him.

Collins put his arm around the sobbing boy, saying nothing, allowing the child to find his voice at his own pace. At length, Korfius shifted position, burying his tear-streaked face in Collins' grimy shirt, and managed to sob out muffled words. "Why—why—we're back in Barakhai, aren't we?"

"Yes." Collins pulled Korfius closer, sparking a dim memory of worrying about petting him in dog form because it might seem like child molestation. Though he now held a naked boy, he did not worry about a matter that now seemed silly and trivial. Korfius needed him, and he would support his best friend as well as he could. There was nothing sexual about comforting a loved one.

"Don't you" Korfius wheezed out. "Don't you want me anymore?"

"Want you?" Collins repeated. He squeezed Korfius. "We're a team, Korfy-pup." He used the pet name that had stuck after a woman in his housing complex had coined it. "Forever."

Korfius snuggled against Collins. "Forever?"

"Forever," Collins said emphatically, though he had no idea how long "forever" might last, given the risky assignment he had just accepted. *At least until tomorrow.*

"Then why...?" Korfius started but never finished. He seemed to struggle with words as he never had before, presumably because he had not used any for longer than a year and a half.

"Zylas and Falima asked me to come, and I did. I wasn't going to leave my forever pal behind." Feeling guilty for every second he had forgotten Korfius' origins and had treated him as just another dog, Collins listened intently and hoped he was getting through. "Besides, I wanted to talk to you."

Korfius sniffled, and the tears stopped. He looked up at Collins. "Tome?"

"To you," Collins confirmed.

"Why me?"

The answer seemed so obvious, Collins laughed but stopped the moment Korfius looked affronted. "I want to make sure you're happy living with me. That you don't need anything I'm not providing. That I'm feeding you okay."

Korfius wiped the tears from his eyes with a fist. "I like being a dog all the time. That's every *lesariat's* dream." He rubbed at the other eye. "And I like having you as my master."

Collins cringed. With Korfius in human form, it made him feel like a slaver. "You're sure?"

"No one forced me to come to your world," Korfius reminded.

"Well, no, but"

"And I could leave if I wanted to, right?"

Stunned, Collins only nodded. "I... never thought about that."

Korfius sat up, freeing himself from Collins' grip. The tears had completely stopped, and his words came more easily. "Sure. I know where stuff is. Just 'cause I'm a dog doesn't mean I'm dumb."

"No, it doesn't," Collins agreed, rocking back on his heels. Remembering the others, he looked around the cave. No one seemed to be paying any attention to them. Aisa and Zylas cleaned up the remains of breakfast without so much as a glance in their direction. Prinivere dozed in her corner. "Are you happy with your food?"

Korfius shrugged. "I like the stuff you eat the best," he admitted. "And that's mostly all I get from you. Some of the others give me that kibble junk. It's not as yummy, but I know it's better for me, and I've got plenty of things to just chew on. I'd like to have you with me all the time, but I know you have to go to class and stuff." His young face screwed into a sidelong knot. "I honestly think I'd miss my quiet nap if you stayed home every day."

Collins could scarcely believe that a dog who had spent part of his life as a boy could be content with the simple ways of an average American dog. It also surprised him to learn that others in his building were feeding his dog.

"In fact, I think you should go out more." Korfius managed a smile. "With a lady who really really likes dogs."

Collins laughed, feeling like a divorced father. "Likes to pet them all day long?"

"That would be nice."

Collins thought he would have a million questions—not many people got the opportunity to talk to their dogs—yet he found himself thinking hard to come up with even one. "Do you... understand me... when I talk to you when you're a dog?"

Korfius bobbed his head vigorously, and the yellow locks flew. "Mostly I do. More so the last few months. Overlap gets better the more time you spend in animal form."

Collins remembered hearing that before, which explained why *Regulars* usually gained overlap faster than *Randoms*. *Usually*, he added to himself, thinking of Zylas' near-perfect overlap. Other factors included practice, desire, natural ability, and level of distractions. On the other hand, it seemed wrong to refer to spending life in one form as overlap."

"So," Collins tried to summarize, "you're basically happy?"

Korfius smiled. "I'm happy," he confirmed. The grin wilted. "Or was. Until you brought me back here. Now I have to deal with switching again. And don't the royals want us dead?"

Thinking of a very touchy subject, Collins lowered his voice to make certain none of the others could overhear. He hoped Prinivere's mind reading did not carry this far or, if it did, that she had her attention turned elsewhere. "Does it bother you that your food contains meat?"

"It does?"

Though Korfius' tone did not contain the condemnation and horror Collins expected, he still grimaced. "I'm sorry. I eat it. And all dog food and treats have it." He suspected some protein-balanced organic kibble might exist in some vegan store, but he doubted he could afford to buy it.

Korfius stretched his limbs, a few dried tears on his cheeks the only remaining sign of his sadness. "I knew some of our shared food was, but that's okay. I know it's not a bad thing in your world." He added, as if Collins might have forgotten, "Eating meat. It's okay there." He lowered his voice to a guilty whisper. "I like it."

"Me, too," Collins whispered back. He had toyed with the idea of going vegetarian on his return from Barakhai, but the hospital food had not given him much of a chance and he had found the lure of fast food irresistible. He did deliberately avoid the pet foods that contained horsemeat as an ingredient. "Our dirty little secret, all right?"

Korfius nodded.

Collins felt as if he had taken little away from a conversation he had risked death to have. "So I should just treat you like a normal dog?"

Korfius jerked back, as if affronted. "Oh, no. You should treat me like a spoiled, pampered prince of a dog. Like on that show we saw."

*Show?* Collins did occasionally turn on his tiny television in the evenings for relaxation. He considered, remembered the *Dateline* special on people who baby their pets, and laughed. "Well, you can forget the steak every night. Their dogs don't live long enough to have to worry about cholesterol levels and heart attacks—"

"Choi-what?"

"—but I'll work on the full-sized bed of your own when I graduate and have a good job."

"No, thanks." Korfius yawned. "I'd rather sleep on yours."

"Great." Collins laid on the sarcasm, not nearly as bothered as he claimed by waking up several times a night with a dog head on his leg or belly. In winter, he appreciated the warm body beside him, and it allowed him to forget he always slept alone. Since his breakup with Marlys, he had not had a relationship serious enough to last longer than a couple of dates, and his last sexual encounter had been with Carrie Quinton. Not that he had not had the opportunity. The notoriety his mysterious brush with death had gained him, along with the improvements physical therapy had made to his skinny physique had brought him the first flirtations of his life. Since his trials in Barakhai, the college girls seemed flighty, obsessed with

the insignificant: all games and looks and alcohol. None of the unattached postgrads suited him. Somewhere along the line, he had fallen prey to the romantic notion of that one perfect mate, and not one of the girls he had met in the last year came close to fulfilling it.

Collins wondered how much of that to attribute to the meltdown of his own family. His parents had divorced soon after he left the nest, and each had become thoroughly preoccupied with his or her own affairs. Collins had ended up in Barakhai the first time because he had had no family to visit over the Thanksgiving holiday. Despite all that had happened, despite his mother's dutiful visits as he recovered and his father's calls from his European vacation, Collins had found himself stuck in the laboratory again over the next year's four-day weekend. Like Korfius' *lesariat* parents, they had raised him and then purged him, and one another, from their lives. Korfius professed not to miss his parents or his seven same-age brothers and sisters, who, like him, had an overwhelming doggy side.

Oblivious to the turn of Collins' thoughts, Korfius continued, "I like tug-of-war, and you don't have to worry that it'll make me vicious, despite what Maia says." He referred to one of Collins' neighbors, a long-legged redhead who considered herself the dorm authority on animal training. "I like the big biscuits, the brown ones—not the little multicolored ones. I'm not the one who took Bernice's shoe; it got kicked under the common room couch. I like Tom, but I wish he'd quit ruffling my back fur the wrong way. Dan's got the perfect touch on car scratching." Korfius rolled his gaze directly onto Collins. "You could learn from him. I would never poop or pee inside, so tell Nita to stop worrying. Nick smells too much like a cat not to be hiding one. And, by the way, you have huge roaches; and they're delicious."

Collins laughed. "Slow down. I don't have anything to write this down with."

Korfius continued in the same tone, as if he did not hear. "Now, if you don't mind, I need a nap." Without further ado, he paced a circle, curled into a ball, and closed his eyes.

Collins rose from his haunches and took a scat on one of the chests, trying to remember all of Korfius' revelations. He now knew that his long-lived dog was intelligent and not color-blind but, nonetheless, a dog and Korfius had no desire to become human again. It seemed strange to Collins who, if given the option of reincarnation would definitely choose to, once again, be a man. Though he might enjoy trying out an animal form for a short time, he had no desire to become one for a lifetime, quick-witted or otherwise.

Zylas came up beside Collins. "Did you find out what you wanted to know?"

Collins bobbed his head noncommittally. "I suppose."

"Not what you expected?" Zylas guessed.

Collins' wishy-washy gesture morphed into a clear shrug. "I don't know what I expected. Korfius is happy with his life, which is all I really needed to hear."

Zylas studied Collins through his pale blue eyes. "You're not happy?"

"I'm... happy, I guess. I just..." Collins paused, uncertain what he wanted to say. "Talking about Korfius' life got me thinking about my own."

Zylas gestured for Collins to continue.

But Collins shook his head. "It's silly, really. My world has so much compared to yours. And yet..." He shook his head again. "Don't mind me. I'm a fool."

Zylas slapped his forehead in mock horror. "Great.

Now I've got my life depending on a fool." He looked stern. "I picked you for a reason, Ben. And it wasn't because you're a fool."

Collins laughed, his somber mood lifted by Zylas' even more serious one. "I didn't mean I'm a



permanent fool. I just meant I was being foolish about this."

"Ah." Zylas' cheeks turned pink.

"But that was pretty good. Save that motivational speech for later. I might need it."

Zylas glanced at Prinivere, who was lumbering into a deeper, darker portion of the cave. "Riches come in many forms, Ben. They can buy a lot of happinesses, but they can't fill the empty places in your soul."

This time, Zylas hit the problem directly, but Collins no longer wanted to talk about it. "Did she go to... change?"

Zylas followed the direction of Collins' stare. "Yes. Prinivere went to find privacy while she takes switch form."

*Takes switch-form?* Collins considered, then remembered that Prinivere had started as a dragon, then had the human-time inflicted upon her. Over the centuries, she had narrowed her switch time. By Collins' reckoning, she took human form from three to seven p.m., which reminded him to set his watch the moment Prinivere revealed herself as human. "And then what?"

"We let her eat. Which might take a while." Zylas pursed his lips and looked toward the chest where they had taken lunch and now Aisa busied herself setting out a feast for Prinivere.

"Then we discuss the details of tomorrow's castle break in?"

"Right," Zylas confirmed. "Mostly how to convincingly take on the personalities of the guards we're imitating. The rest we'll have to play somewhat by ear."

Though Collins would have preferred an airtight plan, he was not dumb enough to expect one. Only so much of the kingdom was predictable, and no renegade but Collins had ever set foot in the rooms on the upper floors of the castle. His thoughts betrayed him. No *renegade but me. I'm here a few hours, and I already consider myself one of them.* Oddly, the realization seemed more comforting than shocking, and he could not find it in him to laugh. It reminded him of the night he had dreamed that his Great Aunt Irene, ten years dead, had called and requested he repair the porch of an elderly couple on a fixed income because an elephant's foot had broken through the steps. In the dream, it had all seemed natural and plausible, and he had only questioned why the couple had chosen to paint the wood olive green. He had felt useful and needed, the one his wise old aunt turned to in a crisis. He looked from Zylas to the massive space Prinivere no longer occupied, to Aisa shooing Ijidan from the feast. The squirrel chattered angrily in the parrot/woman's direction, and Collins wondered dully whether he would survive what his desire to feel wanted and appreciated had gotten him into this time.

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## Chapter 4

THREE hours later, Benton Collins perched on a boulder outside the hidden cave, watching the sun dip toward the horizon he considered west and wishing he had brought a compass. He wondered if magnetic north would even exist here as a concept and realized it did not matter. He could just as arbitrarily call it magnetic southeast. If it made him feel comfortable to consider the sun's passage east to west, like home, it made little sense not to do so.

Gaze fixed on brilliant blue sky, broken only by white puffs of cloud, Collins enjoyed the fresh scent

of damp greenery and natural pine, untainted by the greasy odor of rotting garbage or the bitter tinge of carbon monoxide.

He knew from experience that the sunsets here dwarfed anything he had seen back home, the colors vivid and alive, undiminished by artificial lights or by plane trails. Everything seemed brighter here, as if an omnipotent haze grayed every part of his world and it took seeing Barakhai to bring the realization. The cliff tops pointed sharply upward, treelined and spreading as far as he could see by eye or with the binoculars. Zylas had said they would leave for the castle from a much closer hiding place than this. Clearly, Prinivere would have to carry them there again. Even if a climb were possible, it would take weeks to get to the lowlands.

Without fondness, Collins remembered the stomach-churning flight that had brought them here. He appreciated that Prinivere had brought him to a truly safe haven where the king's men could never reach them. Nevertheless, the idea of what had to follow seemed raw agony: whizzing through the air without the body of an airplane cocooning him or even a safety harness to keep him in place against gusts or sudden movement. He had enjoyed some of the roller coasters on his senior class trip to Busch Gardens, but no one would consider him an adrenaline junkie. Still, he planned to take part in an excursion only a stuntman could relish.

"Don't you think you should give Falima some privacy for her switch time?"

The voice, so near Collins' ear, startled him. He loosed a noisy breath and skittered sideways, banging his shin against an outcropping. He glared at Zylas. "What did you do that for?"

Hunkered on a rock, cloth bundled under his arm, Zylas blinked, expression genuinely bewildered. "What did I do this time?"

Collins put a hand over his pounding heart. "Snuck up on me."

"I'm in man form. I figured you'd heard me." Zylas looked at his shoes, composed of thin wood and string.

"I'll practice making more noise when I walk from now on, okay?"

Collins suspected walking lightly came naturally to an outlaw, let alone a rat, with good cause. He believed Zylas, attributing most of his startlement to his own deep concentration, "Don't go stomping around on my account." He considered. A touch would surprise him at least as much as talking, maybe even result in someone getting hurt if his mind registered it as an attack. "Maybe you could just start speaking from a little farther away."

"Deal," Zylas said. "Anyway, what about that privacy for Falima?"

Collins looked at the horse grazing placidly, black mane striping the golden fur like spilled ink. "She doesn't look too upset."

"Agreed. But remember the other time you came to Barakhai and saw her human form naked?"

An image rose in Collins' mind of Falima's magnificent, muscular curves that complimented her high cheekbones, spare lips, and even her generous nose. "Yeah," he said dreamily. Thirteen or fourteen hours ago, she had emerged, unclothed, from the portal; but he had barely noticed, more concerned about their survival. Finally, he recalled Falima's previous discomfort. Accustomed to nakedness, the denizens of Barakhai seemed not to notice one another or to feel conspicuously vulnerable in a state of undress. Collins' lustful stare, however, had bothered Falima. She had seen it as hungry.

Apparently unimpressed by Collins' answer, Zylas pressed, "And remember how you paid for it?"

Collins' cheeks turned fiery. They had made him disrobe in front of everyone, worried about how he would stack up compared to the other men, mostly stallions, in Falima's life. "Let's go inside," he suggested coolly.

Zylas laughed, dropped his bundle, and headed toward the cave.

Collins recognized the cloth as a crude dress and leggings before limping after his friend. "I should have thought about bringing her clothes." Gradually, the ache in his shin subsided, and his walk became less wobbly.

Apparently reading the guilt in Collins' tone, Zylas shrugged off the words. "You're just not used to switchers and switch-forms."

Collins did not let himself off so easily. "Actually, I was looking forward to talking to Falima. I just wasn't thinking about the... whole nude thing."

Zylas gestured Collins through the opening. "All, so you knew you were hovering. I thought you might have been doing it without thinking."

*Hovering?* Collins had considered his choosing to study the outdoors near Falima's switch time a coincidence; but, before he could say so, he caught sight of Prinivere.

The ancient, withered woman was sitting, eating with a vigor that belied her primeval appearance. She wore no clothing. Her skin was carved into wrinkles, loose upon her bony frame. Her breasts sagged into her lap. Fine, white hair dangled to her shoulders. Her eyes were green, contrastingly vibrant, and catlike, with slitted pupils. She had no nose to speak of, just a pair of slitlike nostrils lost in the creases beneath her eyes.

"My lady." Zylas made a short bow.

Collins pried his gaze from the dragon in human form and copied Zylas' gesture of respect. The stark contrasts that composed this woman drew his attention like nothing else in either world. She seemed so far past death, as though she could crumble to dust at a touch, yet strangely vivid and alive. She was utterly asexual, yet the oddities of her appearance brought no feelings of revulsion. Had Collins caught his grandmother so exposed, he would have covered his eyes, to purge the image from memory; yet Prinivere gave him no such urge. Her nakedness simply was, a phenomenon of nature and without shame. Clothing the dragon matriarch of Barakhai, even in his mind, seemed insolent.

Prinivere returned a nod of acknowledgment, barely glancing up from her meal.

Aisa hummed softly as she moved with slow deliberate-ness around the cave, serving Prinivere and tidying up around her. Ijidan occasionally crept in to swipe a piece of the dragon's bounty. Korfius remained huddled miserably in the corner, his snores rising and falling in regular rhythm.

Zylas dragged Collins to a back corner of the cave, speaking softly. "All right. We've got less than a day to learn strategy, mannerisms, and voices, so pay attention."

"Don't I always?" Collins grinned maliciously.

Zylas dropped to a crouch. "Sure. You learn in your sleep." Without awaiting a reply, he launched into the discussion. "Here's the general plan: Orna and Narladin are off duty tomorrow. We've got moles set up to—"

Collins had to interrupt. "Moles?"

Zylas blinked in obvious confusion. "Not moles. Moles."

Collins lowered himself to the floor beside Zylas, legs curled up beside him. "Oh, that clears it right up."

Evidently catching Collins' obvious sarcasm, Zylas crinkled his brow. "We must have hit a snag in the translation magic. Are you really hearing "moles"?"

Collins nodded, trying to unravel the mystery. The Barakhains rarely used animal slang, which brought a rush of understanding. "You mean informants? Spies?"

Zylas nodded vigorously, removing his hat in the cool shade of the cave and running it through his fingers. "Right. They have a game of dice set up and..." He glanced at Collins, clearly anticipating another translation problem.

Collins gave another encouraging nod. "We have dice." He doubted the ones in Barakhai resembled the hard plastic black and white ones in his childhood board games, nor the translucent rainbows, speckles, and opaque colors of the gamers' dice. Recalling the ancient term "bones" for the game, he guessed, "You must make yours from bone? Am I right?"

"Bone?" Zylas shivered. "Heavens no. That would be... disgusting... dishonorable to the dead."

*Missed that one.* Collins tried again. "Don't tell me. You use something more palatable. Like... dung."

"Shed antlers," Zylas corrected. "Carved into cubes. They engrave figures on each side: star, moon, sun, fire, water, and lightning. They're thrown. Depending on how they land in conjunction, you win or lose." He could not help adding, "Using dung for toys? That would be wasteful."

Collins tried not to think about proper uses for excrement, but he could not quell his curiosity. "Fertilizer?"

"And fuel. It burns nicely, depending on the type."

Not wishing to get involved in a conversation over the most useful forms of poop, Collins returned to the subject at hand. "So you've got some spies to distract these guards..."

"Orna and Narladin."

"Orna and Narladin," Collins repeated, knowing the names would have to flow properly off his tongue. "Orna and Narladin. So we can move in in their places."

"Right." Zylas dropped deeper into his crouch. "It's a good-sized game, and they'll keep it interesting. What do you think is the best time to get in the royal rooms without being seen?"

"What do *I* think?" Surprised at having his opinion considered, Collins forgot to think. "Night? When they're asleep?"

"Guards," Zylas reminded. "Everyone always expects problems at night. And don't forget about switch times."

Collins forced himself to remember the last time he had infiltrated the castle. Then, he had moved in at mealtime, while nearly everyone gathered in one place, leaving the hallways essentially empty. The royalty made a production out of meals, all meeting together at the head table, while guards and servants occupied rows of tables in the dining hall. Collins had made it into their bedrooms without incident and might well have escaped undetected had he not stopped to pet a cat who, in his nervousness, he had forgotten would also be human. "During dinner?" he suggested next. "I could excuse myself early, and you could watch for anyone who might compromise me. It shouldn't take me long to check out a few rooms. It's not like they could hide dragons in a foot locker or under the bed." He paused, considering. Scientists believed the largest dinosaurs hatched from eggs the size of footballs. "Or could they?"

Zylas seemed surprised by the question. "Not in one piece. Even young dragons are huge."

The answer reminded Collins that Prinivere had once surprised him with the assertion that dragons gave birth to live-born young, not eggs. He revised his expectation to compare baby dragons to mammals rather than reptiles. Though much smaller than their parents, even newborn elephants and whales would overwhelm the capacity of most furniture.

Apparently unaware of Collins' distraction, Zylas returned to the plan. "Dinnertime sounds good to me. Now all we have to do is learn to pass for the guards we're impersonating."

Collins groaned. That seemed like an impossible task. His one maternal uncle shared only his mother's maiden name, which she never used. He looked like their mother, she like their father. They even lived in different states. Nevertheless, a new employee at Collins' mother's workplace had pegged them as siblings based only on mannerisms. He did not believe most people were quite that observant, but basic changes in his friends' demeanors or behaviors might raise some red flags. *Yeah, but would I assume imposters?* Collins shook his head. *I might accuse them of becoming pod people, but I wouldn't really believe it.* "All right," Collins said, resigned though filled with doubts as to why he had allowed himself to get talked into doing this. Again. "How do I become Orna?"

To Collins' surprise, he found the ride to the lowlands more exhilarating than frightening. To decrease their chance of being discovered, Prinivere glided low over the mountaintops and hills, skimming the tops of the trees and using her wings mostly for balance and banking. She made the occasional leathery flap with a slow solidness that barely stirred the air around them. Clinging to her back, rather than suspended from a claw, Collins settled into a sturdy crevice between back and wing muscles and enjoyed the view. The ground did not seem that far below him; he believed he could survive a fall. The wind felt like gentle fingers rushing through his dark brown hair and caressing his face. Bathed in twilight, the world seemed vibrant with magic, the greenery a vivid emerald untainted by smog or artificial light.

In rat form, Zylas planted his forepaws on Collins' knee to look out over the landscape without losing the safety of the inner crook of the American's jeans. Falima settled into another niche in Prinivere's musculature. Korfius sat between the humans, doggy head outstretched to catch the wind in his face, tongue lolling, ears flying like streamers. Aisa perched near the base of Prinivere's tail, flapping her wings and squawking every time a movement off-balanced her.

They touched down on an outcropping that jutted into dense forest. Prinivere folded her wings and lowered her head, her breathing a heavy wheeze beneath the rustle of autumn leaves in the wind. Still in place, Collins looked out over the trees. Leaves in myriad shapes and sizes clung to the branches, their green shot through with amber, shades of ginger, and brilliant slices of scarlet. He especially liked the star-shaped leaves of a gnarled tree that did not exist in his world, and he wondered if he could drive the botany professors wild by claiming to have found it on one of Algary's walkways.

With a squeak, Zylas leaped over Collins' leg and slid down Prinivere's side, a reminder for Collins to do the same. Careful not to hurt the dragon, he scooted across her scales on his buttocks, not daring to stand on her back. When they had all dismounted, Prinivere wordlessly trudged into a cave, leaving Collins, Falima, Korfius, Aisa, and Zylas outside. The animals scampered after the old dragon, leaving Collins and Falima alone, both studying the vast expanse of forest.

Falima cleared her throat. "I'm going to switch again soon and won't be back until after you and Zylas... go."

Collins turned to look at her. The twilight sparked a rainbow of highlights through her ebony hair, including blue and green. It brought back a long lost memory of a fifth-grade babysitter who had watched him after school while his mother worked. The sitter had a black Labrador retriever named Shelby who was very shy around adults but loved and protected the children. One day, an anxious three-year-old girl who was the sitter's only African-American charge approached a Caucasian preschooler with a deep tan.

"Look," the first girl started, excitedly comparing their arms. "You're black, just like me."

"No." The second one glanced at the two arms, brow scrunched, obviously thinking deeply. Collins recalled holding his breath, wondering what a guileless preschooler might blurt out when it came to a child of a different race. "Shelby's black," she finally said. "We're brown."

And, Collins realized now with an adult biologist's perspective, the girl was right. The racial differences that seemed so important to some people came down to little more than the quantity of

melanin in their skin. All humans, except albinos like Zylas, were some shade of brown. Human hair, too, varied only in the amount and intensity of its brownness, which was why so many elderly men appeared to have smeared shoe polish on their heads when they tried to recapture the "black" of their youths. Falima's long tresses, however, defied the rule: true, deep, animal in their blackness. It was only one of several exoticisms that might make her seem freakish in his world, that made her consider herself unattractive in her own. Too animal, she had once told him, too much overlap between her horse appearance and her human one.

The timing of Falima's change also made her less desirable to the men of Barakhai, as daytime humanity was considered superior. The conventions seemed arbitrary to Collins, who found her beauty nontraditional yet definitive. He enjoyed her solid, sinewy curves, though they did not resemble the gaunt perceived perfection of American models. Her unaugmented breasts, though not huge, complemented her figure; and the width of her hips and boy-roundness of her buttocks might turn away the men of his world. Collins found her attractive despite the flaws she noticed in herself, and even the unnaturally golden skin added an interesting touch to an already extraordinary appearance.

Falima's voice broke the reverie. "You've got that look again."

"The one where I stare at you and look... hungry?"

Falima nodded. "Yes. That one."

Collins wondered if she still worried that he wanted to eat her. He had tried to convince her that no one in his part of the world consumed horsemeat and that he never wanted to try it. "Can't help it. You're beautiful."

Falima looked away demurely. "I don't believe you, but I like when you say it."

"Believe it," Collins said, meeting and holding her gaze. Her eyes glimmered like sapphires in the dawn light, the windows to a soul equally charming. He knew he and Zylas could not leave for another six hours; Prinivere needed the albino's man-face on which to cast her illusion. He also realized that, if they planned to attend the castle's midday meal, they could not have touched down far from the palace. It was an enormous risk, but a necessary one. If they waited, Falima would have become a horse, difficult or impossible for Prinivere to carry. Everything they did had to revolve around switch times, and Collins realized again how inconvenient that became and how much power it granted full-time humans like Barakhai's royalty. *And me.*

Falima took Collins' hands. "Be careful," she whispered.

The interaction had grown too intense for Collins, who resorted, as usual, to humor. "Careful? Naah. Far more interesting to dive in there, battle-screaming, guns blasting, and go down in a blaze of glory."

Falima blinked slowly. "I-I didn't get everything you just said, but it sounds dangerous. Foolish."

Falima's hands felt warm and sturdy. Collins laughed. "Tome, too." He stroked his chin in a mockery of thought. "So I guess I'll go with your way. Careful, wasn't it?"

"Be careful," Falima repeated emphatically. She leaned forward and kissed him.

Surprised, Collins could do nothing but stand there, enjoying the moist, spongy softness of her lips against his. Then, before he could move, before he could even think, she vanished into the cave, leaving him with the lingering taste of sweet clover and a smile creasing his face.

Collins sat on a rocky outcropping and looked out over the forest. The sun turned fiery, intensifying the colors of autumn. Not long ago, he would not have needed to ponder the significance of a beautiful woman's kiss. It meant good luck and, if things went awry, good-bye. He had another year and some months under his belt: his scrawny little bespectacled self transformed to a more average height and weight, his glasses more stylish, his dark hair cut to a proper length rather than the shaggy disarray his

lack of time and cash usually left it in. He dared to hope Falima's kiss meant something more.

The thought practically banished itself. *What am I thinking? If I brought her back to Algary, she'd be a full-time horse. Miserable. And what kind of a relationship could we have?* The mere contemplation of it struck Collins as silly, and he rolled his eyes at his own attempts to create an attraction where, surely, none existed. *We're friends, nothing more. And it's perfectly normal to kiss a friend about to go off on a life-threatening mission.* Finally, he headed into the cave with the others.

Korfius greeted Collins with a bark and excited prancing. He patted the dog, then, remembering the biscuits, pulled off his pack. He rummaged through it blindly, fingers gliding over toiletries and blundering into the towel. He identified shapes by feel: the mini tape recorder, the Snickers bars, his mag light. His groping fingers stopped there a moment, and he closed his eyes with a grimace of self-deprecation. Many of the conveniences he had packed relied on whatever stale batteries they contained, and he had no fresh ones. Had he planned to stay in Barakhai longer than a few hours, he might have searched for extras, though he rarely kept spares in his room. He relished the two-minute walk to the student union even on the coldest nights, and batteries tended to get lost or ruined in the junk drawer.

Finally, Collins found the dog biscuits. He worked his fingers into the hole in the plastic and emerged triumphantly with one. Anticipating the command, Korfius sat, tail waving with excitement.

Collins gave the biscuit to the dog, who accepted it with a groan of gratitude, then slid down to a comfortable position to eat it. Korfius had switched at 7:00 p.m. by Collins' watch, instead of his usual 8:00 P.m. Falima had ascribed that to the long time he had spent in dog form and his *lesariat* mindset. Collins saw it as proof that the boy preferred his dog form and found solace in the boy's happiness and desire to stay in Collins' world.

Collins glanced around the cave for Falima. The buckskin horse lay on a flat area of the cave on top of her shed clothing. She snuffled at a vein of moss lining a crack in the cave wall hut made no attempt to eat it. Aisa perched on a crag, head turned backward and tucked against her wing. Zylas lay beside Prinivere, his rat form shockingly tiny beside the hulking mass of greenish black that took up most of the back of the cave. Ijidan had remained behind, his job to guard and supply the hideaway in the mountains.

Prinivere's voice touched Collins' mind. *\*Come get some sleep before, your trip.\** Though she chose a neutral word for a possible suicide mission, the emotion in her sending made her concern obvious.

Collins nodded, feeling a bit jet-lagged by the time difference. He searched for a comfortable spot, doubting he could sleep on the uneven stone floor.

*\*Over by me,\** Prinivere suggested. *\*Use my leg as a pillow.\** She raised a foreclaw, then replaced it on the ground.

Collins hesitated. It seemed almost dishonorable, as if his comfort was more important to him than Prinivere's.

*\*It's all right.\** The dragon glanced at the white rat snuggled against her. *\*If I'd let a dirty old rat do it, why not you?\**

Apparently aware of the conversation, Zylas jerked up his head. "Hey!" He sounded more amused than affronted, but Collins flinched. In Barakhai, vermin actually had the intelligence to understand their low station. The law even forbade their mating to create *Regular* offspring. Few wanted more rats or mice in Barakhai, and even snakes and frogs were considered vermin. Since everyone ate insects here, reptiles and amphibians did not serve the grand purpose they did in Collins' world.

"I don't think she meant any offense about you being a rat and all," Collins said with a wink and a grin to show he was joking. "She just meant you stink."

"Oh, fine," Zylas squeaked. "That's much better." He circled, seeking a more comfortable position.

"At least my fur adds some warmth. I'm small enough to scratch any itch." He added mischievously, "And, by the way, compared to you I smell like roses."

Collins muttered, "Dead roses, maybe. Steeped in pickle juice and fox urine."

"What?" Zylas said, with the innocent air of one who did not hear rather than the indignant tone of one who had.

Suddenly Collins wished he had kept his mouth shut, especially as the musky, allspice aroma of the dragon covered all other smells like a deodorant. The lab rats always smelled like cedar chips, and he had never found Zylas particularly malodorous. "Nothing. Forget it."

*\*He said,\** Prinivere started, and Collins cringed, shaking his head vigorously in a silent plea for her to stop, *\*that either one of you smells better than any royal guard. You'll have to roll in rotting skunk weed just to pass.\**

*Thanks.* Collins concentrated on the word, certain she understood.

*\*Now both of you get some sleep. You'll need your wits about you.\**

Collins' humor turned self-deprecating, *You're assuming I have any.* He snuggled against the dragon and found that her foot made an excellent pillow and she did give off body heat, which surprised him. *They're thinking dinosaurs might have been warm-blooded now, and they were egg layers. Why not a dragon?*

*\*A lot of lives are relying on those wits of yours,\** Prinivere restored the significance of Collins' mission. *\*And believe me, you do have them, even if our world doesn't always make sense to you.\**

It seemed redundant to respond to someone who could read his every thought, so Collins concentrated on sleep instead. He did not need to vocalize his appreciation for the dragon's trust, wisdom, and support. If she found goodness and reason in him, it had to be there. If she believed he had what it took to succeed, he surely must. Though she claimed only to read the superficial, she seemed capable of digging deeper into his mind and psyche than he could himself.

Despite excitement and worry, Collins drifted off to sleep.

Collins awakened to a gentle mental nudge moments before a rat dropped unceremoniously onto his chest. He opened his lids and looked cross-eyed at the small white-furred creature.

"Excellent," Zylas squeaked. "As recently as yesterday, you'd have jumped to the moon if I'd done that."

*I'd have jumped to Mars this time, if Prinivere hadn't warned me.* Collins smiled and accepted the compliment. Zylas did not have to know the little secret he shared with the rat/man's lady. He glanced at his watch, which read 11:28 a.m.

Aisa perched on a boulder, in human form, watching the interaction. "If he'd jumped to the moon, you'd have fallen off somewhere in between." She turned Zylas a steep-led-eyebrow look. "If you know he's a mite... jumpy, don't you think you should be more careful?"

Collins sat up, dumping Zylas into his lap.

"Probably," the rat admitted, clambering to Collins' thigh. "I'm just thinking it's better to accustom him to surprises. The king's guards won't tiptoe gently around him."

"True." Aisa tucked a knee between her breasts and turned her steely gaze to Collins. "But if they leap on him while he's sleeping, they deserve what they get." She shook back her thick golden locks, and they fell right back into place. He liked the style on her, flattering to dainty features that gave no hint of the huge, black beak that adorned her face in her other form. Besides the rich yellow hair that perfectly



matched her chest feathers in parrot form and the pale eyes, the only remnant of her other form that Collins noticed was darkly rimmed lids. It appeared as if she applied eyeliner, a product he doubted existed in this primitive society; and it reminded him of the miniature black feathers that striped the otherwise bare skin patches on each macaw cheek.

Collins looked around for Falima, but didn't spot her. Most likely, she had left the cave to graze, dangerous but necessary. He hoped she would maintain enough overlap to hide if she saw someone approaching.

Zylas explained. "I'd like to get started as soon as possible. I figured we could get you ready now." He sprang from Collins' leg and scabbled to a pile of clothing on the floor. "These should fit you."

Collins followed the rat, then hefted a plain gray shift, leggings, and a faded red cloak. "Great. A dress." He glared at Zylas. "If we survive this, remind me to kill you."

Zylas paced out a circle around where the clothes had lain. "Good idea. Threaten the guy your life depends on." A grin stretched the ratty lips wide.

Collins shivered. "Don't do that. Rat smiles look positively evil." He studied the rough homespun in his hands and hoped it would not itch. He turned his gaze on Aisa, waiting for her to politely excuse herself, but she did not take the hint. Remembering that the Barakhains were used to seeing one another naked twice per day, he resigned himself to the fact that he would get no privacy.

Turning his back, Collins stripped off his running shoes, his socks, then his jeans, suddenly wishing he had left on his sleeping boxers. Wondering how the Barakhains survived without underwear, he jammed a foot into the leggings, rushing to get the whole thing finished as soon as possible.

Zylas interrupted, "You might not want to wear—"

Snarling, Collins twisted to face his companions.

"You'll get my underwear when you pry it off my cold, dead legs."

A shocked silence followed, while Collins returned his attention to wrestling with the leggings. The fabric felt like burlap against his flesh and pinched his toes.

Zylas cleared his throat. "I was just going to say 'you might not want to wear those backward.'"

Collins stopped fighting and looked at his feet. Now, he noticed the fabric bunching at his heels and understood why his toes felt so squashed. "Oh," he said sheepishly.

Aisa added with a hint of disdain, "Though you probably shouldn't bare yourself in front of anyone wearing your... precious underwear either."

Collins replied quietly, "No, I guess I shouldn't."

Zylas finally took the hint. "Come on. We're making him nervous. I think he'll do better if we leave him alone for a bit."

Obligingly, Aisa hopped down from the boulder, and Collins watched her walk away. Removing the leggings, he turned them and tried again. This time, they fit much better. He pulled the shift over his head, smoothing out wrinkles with his hands, then added the cloak. He spun, feeling the breeze of the fabric billowing away from knees and thighs, and felt like an utter fool. Suddenly, going stark naked in front of strange women did not seem so bad in comparison.

*\*You look lovely.\**

Prinivere's assessment startled Collins, who had considered himself alone when Aisa and Zylas left. "Thanks, I think."

Zylas skittered up to the dragon's shoulder to examine his companion. "Good. Except Orna buttons

her cloak."

Collins looked down his front, only then noticing the three cloth buttons on his chest. He fastened the lowest one, then the one above it, and finally the last.

Zylas shook his head, his little pink ears quivering. "Undo the first one."

Collins' hand drifted to the upper button.

"No, the first one. On the bottom."

Collins shifted his hand obediently, though the gesture felt as strange as his new clothing. He usually left the top button or two open when he deigned to wear a dress shirt, but he had never heard of anyone leaving the bottom one undone. He unclasped the button, and Zylas nodded approvingly. "Now you look like Orna."

Collins tossed back the cloak. "I feel like Little Red Riding Hood."

"Who?"

"Forget it."

Zylas leaned toward Collins, still studying him. "I'm just saying that's how Orna wears it."

"It?" Collins repeated. "You mean this exact cloak?"

"One of her favorites," Zylas proclaimed proudly. "Swiped it yesterday."

"You did?" Collins could not believe Zylas had slipped away without him knowing.

"Not me, personally," Zylas admitted. "One of ours, though."

Collins nodded, appreciating the renegades' competence. His life might rely on it.

*\*My turn,\** Prinivere announced. *\*Come here, Ben.\**

Though it went against every survival instinct, Collins approached the dragon. The dim light from the cave mouth seemed to swathe her in a gently glowing blanket. Ancient scars marred the green-black scales, some small as splinters, others large as craters. She reached a claw toward him, nails chipped and broken.

Collins lowered his head, but the dragon's massive foot closed over his face. The lowest toe tilted his chin upward, and he met the slitted green gaze with trepidation. He felt as if he were falling deep into those vibrant eyes, spiraling into a dense morass of age and wisdom, from outer weakness to inner strength. His face prickled and grew icy cold. It felt like his features were withering and melting like putty beneath the confines of her scaled, wrinkled claw. Then, within a few moments, she removed her toes from his face and turned her head toward Zylas, still perched on her shoulder. *\*How's that look?\**

Zylas examined Collins, twisting his furry head from one side to the other. He smiled that frightening, ratty smile. "Perfect."

Collins' face felt numb and tingly, though he dared not touch it for fear of damaging the magic.

*\*It's all right,\** Prinivere sent. *\*You can touch it, but it won't feel any different to you. It's an illusion.\**

Cautiously, Collins ran a finger down his nose. It did seem the same, though the pressure on his face gave his flesh that pins and needle sensation he got when trying to bring feeling back into his hand after it had "gone to sleep."

Apparently having heard the same words as Collins, Zylas nodded. "Best not to touch it much, though. You'll have a tendency to look as if you're poking through your face or in your eye, and we don't know if too much handling might shorten the spell."

Collins lowered his hands, simultaneously curious and trepidatious, wanting to know what he looked like yet not sure he could stand the sight of his face. "So... I'm Orna."

"You look like Orna," Zylas confirmed, picking his way down Prinivere's foreleg. "And it's almost my turn."

Collins glanced at his arm, only then remembering he had left his watch and glasses with his regular clothing. They would definitely reveal the deception. Instead, he retreated to the corner that held his backpack, willing himself into character. He was a twenty-seven-year-old female guard with an attitude, gruff yet taciturn, and more than capable of speaking her mind to the detriment of those around her. Though entirely unlike him, he appreciated the role. This way, he could mostly keep his mouth shut. Under his breath, he practiced the voice Zylas had taught him and hoped he did it well enough to pass, should speaking become necessary.

While waiting for Zylas' switch, Collins opened his backpack and examined the contents for anything that might prove useful without revealing who he was. Unless he developed a headache or heartburn, he saw no need to risk discovery of the medicines. He would have loved a bath with soap and shampoo, a liberal application of deodorant, and a good toothbrushing; but those scents might attract undue attention. The illusion made a close razor shave unnecessary on his face, and he knew the Barakhain women left their legs and armpits natural. He was not a hairy man. He slipped his multitool into a shift pocket. It might come in handy, and he believed he could keep it safely hidden. He balanced the lump with his mag light and one of the packs of matches in the opposite pocket, then ran his hands along his clothing. He could feel the items, but they did not leave obvious bulges. No one ought to be touching him, and an accidental brush would not reveal the nature of the objects he carried. It seemed safe enough.

By the time Collins had made his selections, Zylas was pulling a tan tunic over matching leggings. The outfit looked strange on the albino, who usually preferred black. As he adjusted his perception, however, Collins realized the new color suited his friend better. It made his ultra-pale skin seem less stark in comparison. Zylas added a leaf-green cloak to the outfit, which brought images of forests and Merry Men to Collins' mind. Had Zylas added his usual broad-brimmed hat, he might have passed for the taxman-thieving Robin Hood himself.

Noticing Collins' regard, Zylas bowed regally. "You approve?"

Collins shrugged. "It's... different." Caught staring, he now regarded Zylas from every angle, pacing around him with a thoughtful glower. "Suits you."

Zylas grimaced, his small, well-formed nose pulling upward to immerse his sky-blue eyes into a squint. "I'm supposed to be a royal guard, so I'll take that as a dire insult."

Collins threw up his hands in mock surrender. "I'll remember that the next time I decide to give you a compliment."

"See that you do." Zylas approached Prinivere, who had remained silent throughout the exchange. "Ready, my lady?"

The dragon's old head bobbed. As usual, she conserved motion, though she did not seem wiped out by the spell she had cast on Collins. On his last visit, the magic she had cast to allow him to communicate had left her nearly comatose through the following day. Collins felt a warm flush of pride at the realization that he had, apparently, accomplished something by stealing the crystal from the castle.

Zylas approached. The dragon raised her massive foreleg and clamped her weathered claw over his face. This time, Collins could not actually feel the magic, but he smelled ozone, heard an erratic hum, and saw random sparks and flashes emanating from the contact. The process fascinated him, drawing and holding his gaze until he doubted he could pull it away even should he wish to do so.

"What do you think, ma'am?" Aisa's voice, even as softly as she spoke, startled Collins, though he

managed not to show it outwardly. His heart thudded faster in his chest, and he silently caught his breath.

"Are you talking to me?"

"Who else?"

Collins glanced around the cave, at the damp, mossy walls and the craggy floor empty except for his own backpack and a few scattered satchels. "Prinivere. Falima. Someone you might refer to as 'ma'am'."

Aisa raised her shoulders, studying the magical activity in front of them. "You'd better get used to it."

Jarred to the remembrance that he was masquerading as a woman, Collins knew Aisa was right. He smoothed his shift with his hands and drew the cloak more tightly around him, trying to make the gestures look feminine and casual. "Thanks for the reminder. I guess I'd better." It occurred to him that women often played the part of older boys and young men in stage productions, such as *Peter Pan*. He would simply reverse the tradition. He strutted toward the entrance, swinging his hips. "How'd I do?"

Aisa's gaze followed Collins, and she loosed a snickering snort. "Way too much." She shook her head with unspoken disdain. "Just stick with your normal movements, all right? Orna's not a particularly womanly woman, not what one could describe as dainty or..." She pinned her gaze on Collins' hips. "... grotesquely over-the-top flirtatious."

*Thank God.* Collins hopped back up beside Aisa just as Prinivere released what used to be Zylas' face. His forehead had become broad, his eyes dark and widely set, his ears low and partially hidden by a fringe of thick, sandy hair without a hint of wave or curl. Though fair, his skin seemed positively swarthy compared to his milky hands.

Prinivere clearly addressed Aisa, though Collins, and presumably Zylas, heard the question, too. *\*What do you think?\**

Aisa stepped between Zylas and Prinivere. Her right thumb and forefinger pinched her nose, the other three fingers curled around her pursed mouth. At length, she released her face to touch Zylas'. "A bit broader here." She brushed a fingertip along the bridge of Zylas' new nose. "And a touch of red to the hair."

Prinivere reached for Zylas, and a few more sparks flew from the contact. A moment later, she had made the changes.

Aisa nodded her approval. "Perfect."

Zylas explained. "Most birds have a good eye for small details. Aisa's great at that."

"Thank you." Aisa stepped back, still examining Zylas. She nodded again. "Yes, perfect." Her stare fell, and she stiffened. "Almost perfect." She crossed the cave, grabbed a satchel, and returned. Dropping it to the ground, she opened it to reveal jars of varying colors, slim sticks, and a slate. She opened three of the pigments and began mixing colors on the slate with a stick. Glancing between her work and Zylas, Aisa messed with the mixture several times, adding a bit of this or that until she finally seemed satisfied. "Remove your cloak."

Zylas did so, and Aisa painted his arms and hands with the mixed pigments. As she worked, she glanced back and forth from her work to Zylas' face, occasionally pausing to add some color to the mix.

Collins appreciated her intensity and her eye. She seemed a definite asset, and he wondered why Zylas had not chosen her the first time they had met rather than the hostile and flitty hummingbird, Ialin.

The answer came sooner than Collins expected. Even as Aisa worked on him, Zylas twisted his head to his companion, "Ialin will meet up with us."

Surprised that Zylas seemed to have read his mind, Collins started, "How did you...?" Figuring it out, he turned his attention to the dragon. "You told him, didn't you?"

Prinivere rolled her gaze to the ceiling and gave no reply.

Zylas seemed to take no notice of their exchange. "It's important that we have someone who can let the others know if we need anything or something goes awry."

Still a bit leery of the hummingbird/man, Collins looked longingly at Aisa. It seemed impossible that, just a day ago, he had wanted Ialin back. "Can't she do it?"

Zylas closed one eye and squinted along his nose at Collins. "Uh... no, Ben. We need someone who can... um... fly."

"But she can..." Collins started, then understood. "... but not until evening, Ialin's a bird during the day."

*9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.* He had gotten better at remembering that every human was an animal and every animal a human, except for fish; but he still had trouble with the inviolate sanctity of each individual's switch-time. That seemed the key to its inconvenience. If people could choose when they took each form, he wondered if they might not actually consider it an advantage rather than a curse.

Apparently reading Collins' discomfort, Zylas added, "He's just going to keep a lookout. For safety reasons. If he's doing his job right, you won't even see him."

Collins flipped his hands palms up in acceptance. In his most desperate situation atop the castle parapets, menaced by guards in one direction and facing a seven-story fall in the other, he had passed the crystal gladly to Ialin. The hummingbird/man had come through for the renegades repeatedly. Whatever his personal feelings about Collins, Ialin seemed to have the morality to keep him secure. In case of trouble, however, Collins had no doubt who the small, androgynous man would rescue last.

"Ready?" Zylas said.

Before Collins could reply, Aisa did. "Not yet. I need you to remove your leggings."

"What for?" Collins and Zylas said, almost simultaneously.

Aisa sat back on her haunches, stick in hand. "I need to do your legs."

Zylas' and Collins' gazes fell to the leggings.

"They're covered," Zylas reminded.

Aisa stirred the pigments on the slate. "Just do it. You never know."

Zylas complied, grumbling, "You just want to see me naked."

"I've seen you many times." Aisa kept her attention on the circular glide of the stick through color. "Believe me, it's nothing special."

"Thanks." Zylas removed the leggings. "Is this some sort of conspiracy, or is threatening and insulting me right before I risk my life supposed to make me more competent?"

Aisa applied pigment to Zylas' legs. "I'm only kidding. I'm just worried because your coloring alone could give you away."

Seized by a sudden nervousness, Collins headed for the opening. Excitement edged with terror thrilled through his chest. After the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, a wave of patriotism had made him consider joining one branch or another of the military. But, by the time his physical therapy ended, he had disabused himself of the notion, at least until he finished graduate school. Now, he found himself preparing to enter a war in which he had no real personal stake without the benefit boot camp or other training. It seemed crazy that he had not enlisted in the National Guard but instead joined the ragged renegade force of Barakhai.

Collins looked out over the forest one more time. Sunlight sheened from the treetops, lancing through

rare holes in the upper foliage. He could see a glimmer of gold between the trees that he believed represented Falima. Seized by a sudden urge to tell her good-bye, he headed out the opening.

Zylas caught his arm. "Whoa, boy. Don't forget this." He thrust a sword belt, dragging a heavy wooden sheath and blade, into Collins' hand.

Collins stared at the weapon dangling from his fist. "What's this for?"

"We're off duty elite guards, remember?"

"Off duty," Collins repeated. "Yeah."

"They often carry swords."

"Oh," Collins examined the buckle, a crude arrangement of metal that appeared to stab through the cloth. He wrapped the length around his waist. When he tried to pull the sword free, it wouldn't budge, and his efforts sent him staggering around like a drunkard.

Collins found every eye abruptly on him. He stopped trying to draw the sword and stared back. "What?" he demanded.

Zylas stifled a laugh, turning it into a quiet snort. "Maybe it's a fashion statement where you come from, like backward hats. But, here, castle guards don't wear their sword belts inside out."

Collins fingered the buckle, freeing it from the fabric. "Where I come from, we don't have castles, guards, or swords." It was not exactly true. "Except in museums." He unwound the belt, refastened it the reverse way, then experimented with pulling the sword out. It felt heavy and awkward in his hand, worse at his side. "You know I'm not going to be able to actually *use* this thing."

Zylas fastened a similar belt around his own waist. "I'm betting that, if you need to, you will."

Collins had to agree. With his life at stake, he believed he could kill someone. "Sure I will. Just not very well."

Zylas reached up, as if to touch his face, then dropped his hand to his side. "It's too late to teach you."

"I know how to shoot if that's any consolation." Collins had gone on a few hunting trips in high school, though he had never had the heart to actually aim at anything living. Luckily, his friends had mostly arranged them as an excuse to get away from their parents, party, and bang away at a few targets.

Zylas took Collins' arm and led him into the forest. "None whatsoever. We're not imitating bowmen."

Collins went with his friend, lips twitching into a smile. He wondered what Zylas would think if he knew the truth: Collins had never held a bow in his life.

## Chapter 5

A DISGUISED Benton Collins and Zylas approached the castle of the king of Barakhai about an hour after Zylas' change to human form. The forest opened to a grassland grazed by solid, patchy, and speckled cows in a myriad of whites and off-whites, tans and dark browns, blacks and agoutis. Goats ranged between them, their colors displaying a similar spectrum, grazing and prancing, pausing to rear, sidle, and slam their horns together at intervals. Those, too, ran the gamut, from broad and squat to long, tapering corkscrews, hoary pink to ebony. Chickens and ducks ran crazily between them, chasing insects

dislodged by the larger animals' hooves.

Though unchanged, Opernes Castle captured Collins' full attention with all the intensity and violence of his first glimpse a year and a half ago. Four square corner towers thrust toward the heavens, the turreted, rectangular roof supported between them. They seemed higher than the last time, and he shuddered to think that he had once jumped from one of those towers nearly to his death. The jagged shadows of the inner courtyard wall peeked over the outer wall he and Zylas would have to face first. It consisted of defensible block work, interrupted at regular intervals by semicircular towers with the round sides facing outward. A still, crystalline moat ringed the entire structure.

On opposite sides of the wall, a peak-roofed structure supported by two of the towers formed a gatehouse. Collins and Zylas walked toward one of these, trying to look casual. Despite his attempts, Collins' heart beat a frantic, whirlwind cadence, and he fought a war against nerves that tried to drive his hands to a million ordinary tasks: finger-combing his hair, rubbing his eyes, stroking his chin. He contented himself with smoothing his unfamiliar clothing, allowing that small task to occupy hands that seemed determined to reveal him.

A figure on the left tower gestured broadly at them, and Zylas returned a crisp wave. Others shifted on towers and parapets while they drew closer. Then, apparently recognizing them, the guards lowered the drawbridge on sturdy chains. The plank came down with a squeal of rusted hinges, and the lip struck the ground beyond the water with a dull but massive thud. Zylas kept his pace stolid and even, and Collins tried to match it. The urge to run across and inside burned only a bit less brightly than the one that drove him to turn and bolt in terror. Strolling casually through enemy gates barely came in a distant third.

Strangers in the familiar uniforms of King Terrin's horse guards peered down at them. One spoke in a gravely voice, "Orna." He nodded. "Narladin." Another nod.

"What were you two up to?" His tone held a hint of teasing singsong.

"None of your business," Collins growled before he could think of something better to say.

Zylas added with a crooked smile. "It is our day off. She has a point."

"A point, indeed," added a woman peering over the right tower. "She's a regular spear."

Everyone laughed heartily, except for Collins who did not think the joke merited more than a gruff chuckle. He guessed translation weakened it and supposed it probably had a sexual connotation in Barakhain. His sophomore roommate's girlfriend had been fond of saying that men saw a penis in anything with more length than width—and they turned anything wider than it was long ninety degrees. Nevertheless, it seemed appropriate for him to sidestep the mirth, being the butt of the joke and known for having little sense of humor. Grunting, he waved the others off and headed across the drawbridge without waiting for Zylas.

The other man's footfalls scurried after him. As he drew closer, Zylas whispered. "Tread a bit more lightly. For all her crustiness, Orna's still a woman."

Collins eased his step, trying to make it appear as if he had stomped off in mild offense. As they reached the halfway point on the drawbridge, the double oak doors into the gatehouse flew open, revealing the smaller side doors that opened onto the towers and the enormous oak ones that led to the outer courtyard. They marched inside, and the bigger doors slammed closed behind them with a loud finality that made Collins stiffen, though he managed to resist the urge to whirl and face them. He glanced at Zylas,

who stood in easy silence and stared at the second set of doors like a passenger on an elevator. The world plunged into a darkness that seemed nearly total, at first. Then, Collins discovered the many small cracks in the wood and stone construction that admitted small squiggles of light. A ratcheting sound echoed eerily through the confines, the sound of the drawbridge rising. Then silence entombed them.

Muffled voices wafted to them as an eternity seemed to pass in the dull prison of the otherwise empty gatehouse. Collins lowered his head and fought welling panic. He tried to convince himself that discomfort was expanding time tenfold or more, but it still seemed way too long.

"Something's wrong," Zylas whispered, deliberately using English.

A surge of terror jarred bile into Collins' throat. He swallowed hard and forced himself to think around the fear.

The right-hand tower door banged open, and a blond head appeared. "You two are having altogether too much fun alone in the dark. Would you finish up, please, so we can all go back to our jobs." The speaker wore the standard elite guard uniform: tunic white above the breastbone, patterned with stretched aqua clovers, then finishing with the blue-green fabric to just past his knees. He wore a bowl-shaped helmet, and mail showed at his collar and arms. His boots were stiffened cloth.

Now it was Zylas' turn to freeze, clearly uncertain what was expected of them. Although he had surely passed through these gates before, he could only have done so in rat form, perhaps hidden on one of the rebel spies. Collins' mind raced back to the last time he had stood in this position. Then, calming Falima in edgy horse form had taken priority. He recalled that two guards had met them here, having descended from the towers. He tried to remember their names, without success; but a light dawned. He and Zylas were guards and expected to perform whatever duties those others had in the past.

Wishing he had not fought so hard to resist the movement, Collins turned. Though closed, the doors still required securing. Feigning casualness, he stepped toward them, seized the bolt, and tried not to look burdened as he wrestled the massive piece of wood into place on its iron mountings.

Rather than assist, which might have looked cued, Zylas approached the opposite doors to wait for the bolt on the opposite side to lift. With an air of nonchalant patience, he waited for Collins to finish maneuvering, then eased open the doors on his side. The massive set of doors to the courtyard creaked open, and light once again flooded the gatehouse.

"Thanks," the blond grunted, withdrawing back into the tower with a shake of his head and a muttered, incomprehensible comment.

"That close one," Zylas whispered, again choosing English, though it turned his speech pidgin, "Very close one."

"True." Collins concentrated on using English also, less practiced at deliberately dodging the translation spells. He recognized the limitations of the rebels' intelligence work. Small details would lose out to more significant information and events, and clearly no one had posed as a castle guard before. "Let's not compound that by standing here talking about it."

Nodding, Zylas headed into the outer courtyard, Collins at his heels. A jewel-green pasture stretched ahead of them, spotted with gardens and striped with pathways. Wooden buildings jutted from the crenellated wall behind them, and others pressed against the one separating the outer courtyard from the inner. Scattered horses, a mule, and several goats grazed, the latter plucking the less delectable thorns and broad-leafed plants from amid the fuzzy expanse of tender grasses. Gardens interrupted the span at intervals, well-tended beds of vegetables, tubers, and flowers.

Collins took in the scene at a glance, trying not to stare. Last time, he had come masquerading as a city guard from one of Barakhai's territories. Studying the castle scenery in wonder had fit the part. This time, it did not.

Now aware that they should handle gates and latching, Collins and Zylas breezed through the second gatehouse with only a few grunted greetings. The inner courtyard was as he remembered: less grass, more gardens and orchards, stables, kennels, and barracks with pathways linking all of them. Catwalks rimmed the inner walls, hidden behind the toothlike pattern of crenels and merlons. The guards pacing



them gave up an occasional wave, though they seemed not to expect a response as they paced their way in proper step around the periphery.

As before, the castle caught Collins' eye, though not with the same stunning intensity. It blossomed from the center, sun rays gleaming from the construction as if to illuminate it in some glimmering heavenly glow. The four, square towers pointed, straight as spears, to the sky; and the rectangle between them seemed as staid and steady as eternity. The photographs of ancient European castles that Collins' friends had brought home from various vacations told otherwise, crumbling ruins with only a hint at their previous grandeur. That train of thought brought back images of the World Trade Center towers collapsing like giant-squashed anthills. They, too, had seemed as solid as the ages.

Collins walked with Zylas along a cobbled path to the stone-cut stairway leading into the open door of Opernes Castle. He saw the animals grazing the pasture, a random-seeming mixture of horses, sheep, and cows. He saw the goose, goat, and human gardeners weaving delicately through the crooked rows of crops. He saw dogs romping across walkways, grassways, and tended plots, playing rowdy games of tag or barking wildly at larger animals who chose not to join their play. Yet all of that registered only peripherally on his mind. Collins' gaze was riveted on the portcullis that hung open over the entrance, and memory descended upon him. He remembered his desperate dive beneath the falling cross-hatching of metal and wood, the moment of excruciating pain that had exploded through his head, followed by a nothingness that ended in a locked cell in the dungeon.

The anxiety Collins had struggled against since the mission began gripped him then, dragging him into a morass of fear and doubt. *We couldn't even figure out how to get through a gatehouse without arousing suspicions. How are we going to make it in the castle?* His hands trembled, and he trapped them in his cloak pockets to hide their revealing display. He took some solace from the fact that Zylas seemed not to notice; if the man right next to him did not, hopefully others would not either.

As before, the door opened on a spiral staircase that wound upward and downward. From memory, Collins climbed, passing the first landing and its two doors to stop at the second level. There, he paused in front of the right one, drawing a deep breath in preparation. He could hear voices floating freely from behind it, a steady hum punctuated by loud bursts at irregular intervals. He reached for the latch.

At that moment, the door jerked open, and a guard in elite uniform nearly ran into them. Collins back-stepped and found himself staring at familiar female features, a guard he had met on his last journey here. To his delight, he remembered her name. "Lyra," he said on the pent up breath racing from his lungs.

The guard nodded briskly. "Orna." She added, "Narladin." She headed past them, then turned suddenly.

Collins' heart skipped a beat.

"It's *harling* stew," she warned. "I know how much you despise that."

Uncertain which of them she addressed, Collins rolled his eyes and nodded knowingly.

"Thanks for the warning," Zylas said in his Narladin voice.

Lyra continued down the staircase, soon lost from sight.

"*Harling*?" Collins repeated, letting the door swing closed rather than entering.

"Don't worry," Zylas said soothingly. "It's a type of fish, not a bug."

"Good." Collins again steeled himself to enter. "But do I hate it? Or do you?"

"Don't know," Zylas admitted, reaching for the door ring. "We'll have to fake it."

It seemed like an important detail to Collins; but, as the door swung open, this time at Zylas' hand, he

found himself preoccupied with more important things. As before, the king and his retinue occupied a dais at the farthest end of a dining hall that had changed little in the year and a half since Collins' last incursion. *If, in fact, time passes at the same rate here as at home.* King Terrin looked the same, his crown nestled among wheaten ringlets and a full beard. Shrewd brown eyes looked out from a middle-aged face that seemed wise and weathered. At his right hand sat a scar-faced, homely man dressed in a satin robe trimmed with golden embroidery. It took Collins a moment to recognize him, a man who had once appeared to be, and probably was, the king's brother. The scars that swirled and puckered his skin had almost certainly come from his brush with a fiery torch in Collins' own hand.

Hot pinpoints of guilt settled into Collins' chest, quickly banished by the memory of swords flying at him. If the man and his companions had not attacked, Collins would not have had to defend himself in such a reckless manner. They had tried to kill him, would have if not for a hay wagon well-placed by Zylas' friends, the renegades returning his broken body to Algary, and the miracle of modern medicine. Collins had only done what a desperate man had to do in self-defense. The king's brother was lucky to be alive at all.

To the king's left sat a slender woman whose silver-fringed blue silk dress hugged spectacular curves. Gauzy veils covered her face, stirring in the breeze of the open door. Small, white-gloved hands, clutching a spoon, disappeared beneath the fabric at intervals, carrying food to an unseen mouth. Others less familiar and unnamed sat amid the privileged, including the queen, stewards, princesses, a butler, and an adviser. Three trestle tables stretched from the doorway nearly to the perpendicular dais, packed with on and off duty guards as well as servants. A wide variety of dogs wound beneath the tables, accepting offered tidbits or foodstuffs that fell on the floor. Banners and tapestries hung from the walls, and minstrels in white-and-aqua plaid looked down on the diners from a balcony blocked by waist-high handrails and cathedral-cut windows.

Collins absorbed all of this in the moments it took Zylas to usher him from the door to a seat at one of the long tables. "That's Carriequinton," Zylas whispered as they sat between a plump maid and a uniformed low-tier guardsman whose attention seemed focused on a dog just behind his place at the bench. Collins chose the seat closest to the maid, not wishing to attempt small talk with someone who, though an inferior, could get him into huge trouble if Collins flubbed his alter ego's role.

"What is...?" Collins glanced around the room, taking inordinately long to spot the obvious. Finally, his attention settled on the veiled woman, and he responded with "Oh," and then quickly looked away.

"Oh," Zylas repeated.

"How bad is it?" Collins kept his voice below the regular murmur of the diners.

"Bad enough she keeps it covered."

That being self-evident, Collins only nodded. He turned his attention to the food, then wished he had not. Communal bowls held a brownish-gray soup filled with unidentifiable lumps. A servant whisked up behind them, dropping a stale slice of brown bread in front of each of them.

Zylas watched his neighbor glop a handful of the slightly steaming concoction from the serving bowl onto his makeshift plate. "*Harling* stew?" he said, as if guessing.

"Yup," the dog guard replied, glancing across Zylas to Collins and back. "Guess your partner won't be eating much."

*Oh, thank God, it's Orna who hates it.* Though the stew smelled surprisingly appetizing, the idea of sharing food that had had a dozen filthy hands dunked into it made Collins' stomach lurch in protest. These primitives probably did not even know to wash their hands after wiping their butts, *It's a wonder they haven't all sickened and died.* Collins wondered if the switch protected them, allowing their human forms to drink from the same worm-infested mud puddles as their animal forms. *Or maybe early exposure to every germ in creation makes their immune systems stronger than the*

*bacteria-phobic, antiseptic-loving people of my world.* He banished the thought, seizing the moment. "Not eating much, huh? I wouldn't pollute my mouth with a bite of this swill." With that, he shot up from his seat and stormed from the room, leaving Zylas to apologize for and explain his rude behavior.

Once through the door, Collins forced himself to appear casual. He yawned and stretched on the landing, studying the area as he did so. He could hear voices below him, but the winding staircase hid the speakers from view. *They can't see me either. Yet.* Without waiting another moment, he quietly padded up the stairs to the third landing.

A boy of about ten, dressed in servants' aqua linen and sporting a bowl haircut, exited from one of the doors that Collins knew led to the servants' sleeping chambers. The boy stiffened at the sight of him, and Collins froze. His mind raced, seeking words to explain his presence in some innocent and logical fashion.

The boy bowed, head low and hands trembling.

Realizing it would look far more suspicious for an elite guard to stammer out excuses to a young servant, Collins steeled himself and tried to look haughty. "Carry on," he said, gesturing regally for the boy to descend.

The boy did so in a relieved scramble.

Collins continued upward, hyperalert, heart pounding. The last time he had come here, the innocent stroking of a calico cat had given him away. Now, he worried that a chance encounter on a servants' landing might do the same. *Stop it, Ben. It's all right. Guards go up here all the time to get to the upper palisade and towers.* Unlike the cat, the boy had not seen him enter a restricted area, yet he could not help feeling desperately afraid. *You're a guard,* he reminded himself. *And a woman, can't forget that. An elite woman guard of Castle Opernes.*

Collins hurried up the stairs and paused on the next landing, avoiding the huge arched window opening onto the courtyard below. Last time, the cat had perched on its ledge, looking irresistibly like his childhood pet. Now, he saw no humans or animals of any kind. Forcing out a breath held too long, Collins reached for the door ring.

Warded against switchers, the door would never have yielded to the touch of any of the renegades, and they would have triggered a magical alarm had they made the attempt. But it opened easily, and mercifully silently, for Collins. The magic baffled him; he had given up worrying about its operation. All that mattered was that it worked for him. Cautiously, he peeked into a room he had searched once before, though far more thoroughly than it required now. He did not need to open drawers, chests, and cupboards to find something as large as a dragon. The hunt for the crystal had seemed like impossible folly. This struck him as far more reasonable: a glance into each room, and he could leave with no one the wiser.

Despite these reassurances, Collins glanced nervously around the room before daring to enter and shut the door behind him. It looked much the same as it had on his last inspection. A curtained bed took up most of the middle of the room, its frame more like a squat dresser with multiple drawers and shelves. A chest pressed up against the foot of the bed; and, overhead, a wrought iron chandelier held a dozen unlit candles. A massive tapestry, faded and irreparably dusty, depicted a hunt scene from a past when animals and humans had existed independently, a past only Prinivere was old enough to remember. Blurry mounted men harried a huge animal with spears. Last time, Collins could not discern the object of the hunt. This time, armed with a greater knowledge of Barakhai's history, he made out the frayed outline of a dragon.

The woven picture bombarded Collins with the terrible images of Prinivere's story. Once, Collins knew, dragons and humans had made peace sealed by a crossbreeding that was agreed to reluctantly on the dragons' part. A dragon ensorcelled to man shape and the king's daughter created a set of male twins. Though nature intended the miscarriage of those boys, the fetuses kept themselves alive, with

magic, at the expense of their mother's life. The dragons saw evil in a phenomenon the humans viewed only as unfortunate tragedy. Shunned by their father's side, feared and despised by most of their mother's, the boys grew up bitter, robbed of the magical training they saw as their legacy. Ultimately, the intensity and focus of their resentment had resulted in the Curse, twisted by the inherent wrongness of their very conception. One wanted to forget and the other to spend half his life in the dragon form he believed his birthright. Each got his wish for everyone but himself. One caused the populace to become ignorant of its own past, and the other made all but the royal family half-time animals. Too late, the dragons destroyed the twins, provoking the war that had, ultimately, resulted in their extinction.

Reminded of his purpose, Collins headed for the other two doors he knew led from this room. The one he had exited through before led into a garderobe or primitive bathroom. The memory of diving into that room to escape four swordsmen and bashing his head on the overhanging lip of the seat remained painfully vivid, and he shivered. No one could have squeezed even one dragon into such a small space, so he ignored that door and discarded the remembrance. He had never passed through the other door, but he guessed it opened onto another bedroom, solely on his own instincts. Zylas' descriptions of the upper two floors necessarily ended at the landings.

Collins put an ear against the door, hearing nothing. The gesture seemed futile. Danger would more likely come at him through the door he had entered from the landing, since the only outside access to this room would have to be a window. Steeling his muscles nearly to the point of pain, Collins tripped the latch and shoved.

A rush of flowery perfume struck Collins' nose. His gaze played over the furniture, registering nothing but the absence of any movement. Reassured, he stepped inside, not quite ready to shut the door behind him. Pushed against the far wall, the bed in this room sported gauzy, flowered curtains. They fluttered in a slight breeze that managed to ooze through the slits the cathedral windows gradually tapered into as they approached the interior. Collins suspected he had found the queen's chamber. Like the previous one, it had drawers and shelves built into the frame of the bed, obviating the need for dressers. Pretty knickknacks in the shape of tiny bottles, birds, and horses decorated the open surfaces. A large chest held a gold-handled brush, comb, and hand mirror.

Seeing no dragons, Collins withdrew back into the first room. Leaving that one, too, he found himself back on the landing, facing the opposite door. One *down. Three to go.* Sucking in a deep breath, he opened the door onto another familiar room. Here, he had met with Carrie Quinton to discuss the renegades and the kingdom. She had revealed Zylas' deceit: bringing both of them to Barakhai with lies and trickery, and Collins had come dangerously close to defecting.

Apparently a private sitting room or library, this room held a shelf of books, three padded chairs, and a table. An eight-armed candelabrum rested in the middle of the table on a lacy oval of cloth, a pitcher beside it. Two windows like the ones in the queen's bedchamber lit the room, revealing no dragons but two other doors. Choosing the left one at random, Collins opened it onto a garderobe. Shutting that door, he selected the other and found a third bedroom, less orderly than the first two. Two beds lay flush against opposite far corners. The first had neatly tied curtains and matching linens of blue and gold, as vivid as Aisa's plumage. The second was trimmed in rainbow hues, rumpled, and covered with a pile of stuffed animals. Balls, blocks, and dolls lay scattered across a dog-shaped rug in the room's center. Spanning the entire far wall except for where the beds stood, an ornately carved dresser held two sets of grooming supplies. Silver-handled and matched, the first sat in an orderly line on an embroidered square. The set near the unmade bed lay in wild disarray, the brush dangling between the dresser top and wall, the mirror facedown on the floor, and the comb tossed sideways on the bare wood. Between these, a large bowl held two toppled pitchers and a layer of brackish water.

Knowing he had found the princesses' room, Collins took some solace in the realization that even royal children had to share. An only child, he had not had to endure that discomfort, a fact that had endeared him to his friends and eased the pain of having no siblings. Retreating from the room, he closed

the door, then escaped back to the landing.

*Half done.* The realization brought a smile to Collins' lips. For the first time, he allowed himself to believe he might actually succeed. *It's going to work. It's really going to work.* Collins headed up the stairs, this time not surprised to find no one on the landing. Thus far, his luck appeared to be holding.

Collins had gone through both of the fifth-floor doors in the past. The left one, he knew, led to the guestroom where he had spent a peaceful night as the king's visitor while they very nearly swayed him to their side. One door from that room opened onto another garderobe. Two others led to the shared bedchambers of the king's male relatives. The right door from the landing led to Carrie Quinton's bedroom.

Collins' blood ran cold at the thought of entering that room again, so he turned his attention to the other one. In no time at all, he had established that the guest and male royal quarters had no dragons in them. Forced to confront Quinton's room, he sucked in a deep, calming breath, releasing it slowly from his pursed lips. Memories descended upon him again, of the exquisite hour they had spent alone together here. He could picture her beautiful, high-cheeked face looking up at him, the baby blue eyes filled with desire, the dark blonde curls falling around the sweet curve of her neck. It had been an hour of perfection floating free from the day of terror surrounding it. The most stunningly attractive woman in the world had given herself to scrawny, average-looking Benton Collins. In moments, though, that joy had shattered into pain. She had fashioned a vast future for them in Barakhai. He had tried to convince her to hand over the crystal she wore as a necklace and escape back to their own world. When she refused, he had tried to steal it, and she had called in a mass of hidden protectors. Images rolled through Collins' mind in an instant, bittersweet, rife with an excitement that spanned both ecstasy and terror.

Steeling himself, Collins tripped the latch, and the door swung open to reveal the bedchamber of the Other-world adviser to the king. Unlike the rest of the castle, this room had changed a lot. The tapestries full of cavorting animals, cheerful forests, and happy people had been replaced with more somber images. Only one remained the same, an enormous portrait of a ginger tabby cat luxuriating on a bed similar to the one that took up most of the rest of the room. One depicted sad-eyed children plucking flowers in a desolate field, another a dull still life of stunted vegetables and flowers. The last was the most animated, but also the creepiest. Carnivores dominated the otherwise muted colors. In the foreground, a sable wolf crouched menacingly in front of a roaring tiger, and a lion flew toward a rearing leopard or jaguar. In the background, a mass of surging claws, teeth, fur, and feathers blended into a bloody, riotous war of color. Once painted to resemble a night sky in their own world, Quinton's ceiling now held only flat, blue paint. Curtains lay draped around the bed, missing the golden tassels that had tied them back. A new chandelier hung in the center of the ceiling, and the wall brackets that had once held the torches he had used as weapons were gone. Only the carved wardrobe and matching chest remained unchanged.

A shiver racked Collins as he crossed the room to peek into the garderobe and the royal women's quarters, where he found no dragons. He closed those doors and prepared to leave; but, once again, the wardrobe grabbed his attention. It seemed unlikely that he might find the dragons there, yet foolish not to check every possible place while he was here. One unturned stone meant eternal doubt that could only be quenched by another foray here. Catching the clasps, he wrenched open both doors.

A figure inside sent Collins leaping backward with a gasp, heart galloping dangerously fast. He glanced wildly around him, awaiting the inevitable scream. When it did not come, he dared to peek into the wardrobe again. His own eyes looked back at him from behind the dangling clothing. *A mirror.* Warped and scratched, it reflected Collins in imperfect detail, yet he could still make out the familiar features and the distinctly unfamiliar garb. He looked silly in a dress. Then, he remembered the purpose for it, and terror froze him. He focused in on his face as ice streamed through his veins. *That's my face, not Orna's. The spell has worn off!* Stock-still, he tried to think of a solution to his dilemma, without success. A myriad of options ran through his mind, all immediately discarded. He could not remake the features himself, and he had no time to return to Prinivere, even should he make it from the castle alive.

He certainly could not stay here.

*Zylas!* Thoughts of his companion spurred Collins to action. *If his wears off, he's dead.* Desperate to capture the leader of the renegades, the king would spare no man to do so, would show no mercy once he did. *I've got to get Zylas out of here.* Snatching up one of many veils hanging in the closet, Collins sprinted from room to landing, pausing only to shut the door.

To Collins' relief, he met no one in the stairwell. He charged downward, feet thundering on the steps, pulling the veil over his face as he ran. Momentarily blinded, he misgauged the uneven stairs. His foot slammed on wood higher than he expected, and he stumbled. The sole of his cloth shoe skidded down the edge of several stairs, and he scrabbled wildly for balance. For an instant, he hovered between recovery and collapse, arms pitching, body weight hopelessly committed. A flash of heat surged through him, then he regained his equilibrium and continued his headlong rush. He still had not encountered anyone else as he adjusted the veil in front of the dining room door.

Only then, logic finally caught up with Collins, worming through the panic. Most likely, the magic of the warded doors had stripped his face of Prinivere's magic, which meant Zylas still looked like Narladin. Hidden behind the veil, he would have to quietly inform his companion of the problem, and they could both slip safely beyond the castle walls.

At that moment, a dog-guard burst through the dining hall door, dancing sideways with a surprised gasp to keep from colliding with Collins. Several heads jerked toward the pair in the entryway, as the guard eased around Collins with a gruff epithet. Revealed, Collins caught the door, scanning the interior for Zylas. On first inspection, he did not find the albino. He adjusted his search for the man of Prinivere's illusion and, this time, found him sitting among the guards and servants. Zylas stared at Collins with the same incredulity as some of the others, but his strange features contained a trace of fear.

Forcing himself to keep his composure, Collins glided across the room to Zylas, trying to give his movements a bit of femininity.

Zylas met Collins halfway, then hissed into his ear, "What the hell are you doing?"

"The spell's worn off. It's worn off!" Collins struggled to keep his voice at a whisper. "We've got to get out of here."

Zylas peeked beneath the veil. "What are you talking about, you moron?" He spoke directly into Collins' face. "You look fine."

Quinton's voice wafted over the gentle music. "Hey! That's mine. How did you get my—?"

Zylas whipped off Collins' veil. The breeze of its movement chilled his exposed cheeks, and a shiver spiraled through him. He shielded his face with his hands. "What are you doing?"

A serving dish crashed to the floor, splashing stew and bunks of bread over the nearest diners. Instead of attending to the mess, the servant who had carried it rounded on Zylas and Collins, arms flailing. "It cost me a week's wages to get you that food. I don't care if you did come all the way to pick it up yourselves. You're still paying."

Confused and growing frantic again, Collins backed away. "Wh-what?"

Zylas tried to salvage the situation. He took Collins' arm, dropping the veil. "Sorry. Day off. Too much to drink." He addressed the servant. "You'll get your money, don't worry."

But the servant stopped gesticulating, arms falling to his sides. He studied the pair in front of him with eyes dropping to wary slits. "There's no way you could have got here so fast. You were in the middle of a dice game when I—"

King Terrin sprang to his feet. "Seize them!"

The scrape of shifting chair legs filled the room.

Zylas took slow backward steps, voice strained. "Easy now, friends. I can explain everything."

The room surged toward them like a tide. Past reasoning, Collins whirled and ran. He slammed into a burly man. His head snapped backward, and pain shot through his tongue. He staggered into a sea of arms. Callused hands grasped his wrists, scratching and pinching flesh. His first instinct, to surrender to them, passed swiftly. The whole situation overwhelmed him. He had seen his own face, yet Zylas assured him the disguise remained intact. And, somehow, the king had seen through it all.

Zylas' acting voice sputtered over the shouts. "Stop, you fools. It's me! Narladin. What are you doing?" His sword rasped from its sheath, and Collins suddenly remembered his own.

*If they catch us, they'll kill us.* Energized by the realization, Collins clamped his teeth onto one of the restraining hands. The man jerked back with a curse, releasing Collins' right wrist. He swung wildly into the crowd, connecting with a meaty thud that sent pain searing through his fist and down his arm. "Let go of me!" he howled, lashing a kick toward one's face. The guard retreated, sparing his mouth, but several others moved in to take his place. Collins twisted, making a bold leap for the door.

Hands gripped his left wrist and ankle jarring him up short, kindling a fire through his knee. He crashed to the ground. Fists pounded into the back of his head, smashing his chin against the floor, and someone relieved him of his sword. *My fault*, he realized. *All my fault* He caught a dizzy, sideways view of a now-silent, disarmed Zylas being carried through the door by three guards. "No. Nooo!" He lunged again but, this time, gained no ground at all. A half-dozen guards held his limbs or pinned him to the floor. "I didn't do anything—"

The hands slammed into the back of his head again, this time driving his face to the tiled floor. Pain exploded through his head. His entire body went limp, beyond his control. Urine warmed his thighs, then merciful oblivion descended upon him.

Benton Collins groaned awake, the agony in his head momentarily overwhelming all other pain. Nausea roiled through his gut, but he managed to keep from vomiting with an effort that hardly seemed worth the result. Acid burned his throat, and as he became more aware of his body, pain screamed through his left knee, his nose, and his arm. He tasted blood. He scraped his tongue against his teeth, discovering a sharp bite on the right underside toward the front. *I don't believe it. I don't frickin' believe it.* He clearly had passed out for longer than a minute or two, which meant he had suffered a concussion, at the very least, perhaps even a brain hemorrhage. He knew he might die in this accursed place, but it seemed unfair. Somehow, he had expected his brave words to carry him, for poetic justice to see his mission safely done. He opened his eyes.

Light flooded in, accentuating Collins' splitting headache. He groaned again, narrowing his gaze to a slit that admitted only a pair of curious dark eyes looking back at him. Startled by the sight, he wrenched his eyes fully open again. A man crouched in front of him, on the opposite side of heavy, iron bars. He held his head tipped sideways to meet Collins' gaze, his expression quizzical. A huge nose disrupted an otherwise softly contoured face, and wispy brown hair scarcely covered his jutting ears. He wore a sword at his left hip, a key ring at his right. "Who are you?" the other man asked.

For a moment, Collins did not understand the question. Panic crowded his thoughts. *Do I have amnesia?* He dismissed the thought at once. He knew his identity. It was not a question of who, but of where. Afraid to move his head, he rolled his eyes, trying to see around his prison, which consisted of three windowless stone walls, a granite floor, and the barred gate. Dangling collars and shackles, and a dented dingy chamber pot, completed the image. "I'm in hell," he whispered.

"Opernes Castle," the stranger corrected, looking perfectly comfortable low to the ground. "Now, who are you?"

Collins shook his head. The charade was clearly over.

"And don't say Orna," the guard cautioned. "We know you're a man."

Collins' hand went instinctively to his privates; if they had looked, they might have meddled. A quick touch revealed no pain. Everything seemed intact, even his underwear; though they had confiscated his sword, its belt, the cloak, and the objects he had carried in his pockets. "I'm not telling you anything." He tried to keep his tone defiant, though fear shuddered through him. Zylas might have trained to withstand torture, but Collins would probably fold like a warm candle.

The guard only shrugged, rising. His position had made him seem small; but, now, Collins could see the man stood probably no more than an inch to either side of his own five feet eleven inches. "Your choice. We'll just wait for your switch, if you wish."

*That'll be a long wait.*

The guard lowered his head. "But you should know, the king prefers cooperation."

*Doesn't everyone?* Collins kept the snide observation to himself. The less he said, the better. Or is it? Terror fluttered through his chest as he realized delay and time were not on his side. When he did not change within twelve hours, they would know he did not belong in Barakhai. If anyone had recognized him at the portal, before Prinivere had rescued him, they would know his identity as surely as if he had switched. More importantly, Zylas would switch, and they would know the white rat instantly. Collins could only hope the king's guards had not already discovered the Loner Aisa had applied to hide the pallor of Zylas' albino skin. "Where's... my companion?"

"Who's your companion?" the guard asked, his attempt to speak casually an obvious sham.

*What am I, a moron?* Realizing Zylas had called him just that before the charade fell apart, Collins tried to play the game safely. "My companion. The man who came with me."

"In another room." The guard straightened his silks, aqua and white, without the stretched clover pattern of the elite force. This man, at other times, was a dog. "You didn't think we'd keep you together to conspire, did you?"

Clearly rhetorical, the question did not warrant an answer, so Collins did not give one.

"King promised to go easy on the one who talks first, gives up the other."

Having seen his share of cop shows, Collins wasn't about to fall for that ploy, especially since he knew Zylas would never let the burden of punishment fall on an innocent companion. On the other hand, he could not see silence working to their advantage. Time would reveal Zylas and, ultimately, himself. His thoughts raced in myriad directions, every one a dead end. With his heart pounding an aching drumbeat in his head, he found it nearly impossible to think clearly. *Maybe Falima and the others will rescue us.* Collins knew he could not pin all of his hopes on such a thing. The renegades would first have to get word that the mission had failed, then find a way to break into the king's dungeon, all before Zylas' midnight change. He could not count on that happening any more than he could that Zylas would escape and rescue him, too. He had to find his own way out. "All right," he started carefully, "I'll talk. But only to Carrie Quinton."

The dog guard crooked an eyebrow, clearly trying to figure out Collins' angle. The request had to seem stunningly bizarre. "Why?"

Collins stared back. "Carrie Quinton," he insisted, keeping any hint of insolence from his voice. Antagonism would not get him what he wanted. "I'll talk to her and *no one* else."

The guard bobbed his head, rubbing his chin with his fingers. "Very well. I'll see if she's willing." He headed toward the door Collins knew led to the upper staircase, jabbed one of the keys into the lock, and twisted. It gave with an echoing click. The guard eased open the door and slipped through, then the



bolt rang home behind him.

Collins sagged, letting the coldness of the floor numb his wounds. He worried about the blow to his head; nothing else seemed worse than a bruise or strain, a nagging background cacophony with the sole purpose of slurring his thoughts. Still incapable of finding a good solution to his dilemma, he focused his hopes on the desperate gambit he had taken. Carrie Quinton hated him. Of all the people in this strange world, she would most like to watch him slowly tortured to death. Yet she alone could fully understand the position in which fate had placed him. The best and the worst of his hopes lay with her.

An eternity seemed to pass while Collins waited, alternately concerned about and glad of the delay. It gave him time to think and to brood, to nurse his wounds and to suffer them, to hope and to worry. He dozed a bit, his anxieties peppering his dreams. Then, when all seemed lost, two new guards appeared, with Quinton in tow. She wore a simple dress that hid her deliciously proportioned curves, and a veil covered features Collins had once found singularly beautiful.

"Alone," Collins said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

They all knew what he meant. The guards looked askance at Carrie Quinton, who hesitated before returning a decisive nod. "Stay just outside. I'll call you if I need you."

The guards gave her a look of fierce concern, then pinned Collins with a pair of savage glares. Without a word, they left the room, closing the door behind them.

Quinton did not waste a second. "Who are you?"

Collins swallowed hard, and all of his rehearsed words left his mind in an instant. He would have to play this carefully and by ear. "Someone..." he started, his voice maddeningly unsteady. "... from your world."

"Yes," she said, her stance revealing the sternness her hidden features could not. "The flashlight was a dead giveaway."

*My mag light.* Collins closed his eyes. *Gone already, along with my multitool and matches.* It was the second multitool he had had confiscated by Barakhains, and he darkly wondered if he could supply the entire royal family.

Quinton's tone gained spite. "It's you, isn't it?"

Many humorous replies came to Collins' mind, but he forced himself to discard them. No matter how self-deprecating, jokes would only antagonize Quinton. He knew exactly what she meant. "I'm sorry." He lowered his head, his tone sincere. "I am so very sorry, Carrie. Please believe me; it was an accident. I never would... I never could... I... I never... meant to hurt you."

Quinton's entire body stiffened. For an instant, Collins thought she would leap on him in a mindless frenzy of hatred. Instead, she wound her hands in the fabric of the veil and yanked it from her face.

Scar tissue marred the once classically beautiful features, leaving lines, ridges, and swirls of odd-looking, hairless flesh. Her sculpted nose listed to the right between keen blue eyes with their irregular lashes and gleam of deep anger. Her ridged brow reminded him of a *Star Trek* Klingon, and her silken blonde tresses started farther back on her head, leaving a jagged and receded hairline. Though sickened by the sight, Collins would not allow himself to look away. He sank to the floor in a gesture of abject apology. "I'm so sorry." *I caused all that.* Moisture blurred his vision, wholly unfeigned. "I am so, so very sorry."

"Why?" Quinton asked, emotion choking her words. Whether she suffered from a rage too intense to speak clearly or anger mixed with deep sorrow, Collins could not tell. But he did understand that she wanted to know the reason he had caused her such agony, not why he now chose to beg her forgiveness.

"You were talking marriage. Kids." Tears glided onto Collins' cheeks. They had slept together one

time, and she had used it as the basis of an entire future. "I was twenty-three. A boy. I... got scared."

"Of me?"

Collins shook his head. "Of commitment, not you. You're smart, beautiful. Perfect."

Quinton turned away. "Not anymore."

"You are," Collins forced out, "to me."

Quinton whirled, scarred features bunched, a raw primal rage flashing in her eyes. "I'm ugly, Benton Collins. Ugly." She stepped menacingly toward him. "And it's because of you."

"Yes," Collins admitted. "It is because of me. And I want to make it right."

Quinton crouched in front of the bars, lowering herself nearly to Collins' level. All trace of humanity disappeared from her eyes, leaving a depthless madness that scared him more than anything in his life. "I've thought about this for a long time, and I know exactly what to do."

Collins froze, allowing her to speak her piece.

"We'll start with a leisurely castration. No anesthesia, dull dirty knife, and you get to watch."

Collins shivered.

"We'll slather you with dung and let you suffer the slow festering of your wounds."

Not allowing himself to focus on the image, Collins fell into the nervous humor he had managed to previously avoid. "Sounds like you've got this whole thing planned out pretty well."

Quinton rose, towering over him. "I had plenty of time to work on it while they cleansed my wounds and changed oozing bandages."

An apology now seemed totally inadequate. "You've got me, and you can do what you want with me. But it doesn't cost you anything to hear me out."

Quinton said nothing, which Collins took as an invitation for him to continue. "Korfius and I came back to check on you."

"Korfius?" she repeated thoughtfully, and Collins hoped that meant she believed the dog was his captured companion. The Barakhains had far less reason to harm him than Zylas.

"You have to believe me. If I'd known how badly I hurt you, we would have come back sooner."

Quinton stared.

"I had a long recovery myself. I fell off a castle tower, broke a bunch of stuff, had some internal injuries. So, it couldn't have been a lot sooner, but—"

Collins waited for Quinton to say something, anything. When she did not, he continued, "I couldn't get you off my mind. I realized... I... love you." It was a lie, and Collins felt as if the words were sticking to his tongue. He had always had difficulty saying things he did not mean.

"You did?" Quinton finally managed.

"I do," Collins said, for some reason finding those words much easier to speak. "I still do."

Quinton turned away. "No one could ever love this face."

"Someone who loves you only for your appearance is not worth having. Looks fade over time." Though true, Collins could not help feeling hypocritically shallow. He had pursued Quinton as much for her flawless features and figure as the many things he had believed they had in common: a science background, their time in Barakhai.

And Quinton was not buying it. "What a trite and easy thing to say."

Collins walked a fine line and knew it. He needed her to trust him, but if he insisted too much, his insincerity would become transparent. She had seemed a bit crazy to him before their confrontation, and the destruction of her most powerful attribute could only have further unbalanced her. "Look, I came here because I missed you. Then, the king's men attacked me, and I found out how bad off I had left you. I didn't know how to handle that. I thought if Korfius and I could sneak in here, I could find out the truth. My mistake was trying to let you know who I am without alerting anyone else."

"The veil thing?" she guessed with clear puzzlement. "That was supposed to—"

Collins tried to look embarrassed. "Okay. Not my best work. But I knew the kingdom wouldn't forgive me, and I thought you might."

Quinton frowned, shaking her head.

"I mean I hoped you would, stupid as that sounds. I still love you."

"Do you?" She sounded more cynical than hopeful.

"And I know how to fix the damage I did."

That got Quinton's attention. "You're not talking about skin grafts, are you? Because they can't—"

"No. I'm talking about magic." Collins made a gesture that outlined his own face. "Like this. A real fix. Complete and total."

Quinton gritted her teeth, her face puckering into fierce lines. "Don't toy with me, Ben. I'd sooner see you suffer an excruciating, drawn-out death than look at you."

Collins believed it. "Look at me, Carrie. Look at my face. This isn't clown makeup." He rubbed his cheeks until they blanched, then turned scarlet from friction. "If they can do this for me, imagine how much easier to just restore what was already there. Or even better." Catching his mistake a moment too late, he added quickly, "As if that was possible—how do you improve on perfection?"

Quinton dropped to her haunches, her movements still hauntingly graceful. She had maintained the figure of a Hollywood dancer, pure beauty if one could overlook the twisted, furrowed scars of a once-handsome face. *And her clingy, intense, and desperate personality.* Collins could scarcely believe he had once found Carrie Quinton so stunningly attractive, and that thought made him feel even more small-minded. He had seen her as the permanent answer to an otherwise lonely existence: pretty, smart, with the shared experience of Barakhai from a vantage point no one else could understand. *Was I really seeing all of that, or just a pretty face, a pair of large breasts, and gorgeous curves?* He had discovered the volcanic flaws seething just below her superficial beauty, yet that had not stopped him from wanting to sleep with her again. *Sleep with, not marry.* Collins realized that, until she got some serious mental counseling, Quinton's looks were all she had, now melted into a puddle of fleshy scars. *Poor Carrie.*

Several moments passed in silence while Quinton considered the situation and Collins waited for an answer. Finally, she said, "I assume there's a price for this fix?"

Collins had no problem bartering away Prinivere's abilities. The renegades owed him this much. "Only freedom for me and my companion."

"Oh, is that all?" Quinton spoke with clear and evident sarcasm. "I'm sure the king won't mind letting his prisoners go just to help me."

Quinton could not bluff Collins, who already knew how seriously King Terrin took the counsel of his adviser from a high-tech world. "He'll listen to you."

"Maybe."

"He'll listen to you," Collins insisted. "Especially if you tell him you're going to personally meet the one

with the power to change people's faces." He worried about revealing Prinivere, especially since he had once promised he never would; yet he saw no real harm in it. The renegades would see to it that no one followed him and Quinton. The dragon had already shown herself to the king's troops once, and he knew she would accept risk to rescue Zylas and, he hoped, himself.

Quinton rose with slow thoughtfulness. "I... could do it," she finally said, the words anything but a guarantee.

Collins could not afford to let it go at that. "And will you?"

"I... will." Quinton continued to study Collins. "With conditions. You take me to whoever can fix me. Korfius stays."

Though relieved Quinton had taken the bait, Collins tried to appear circumspect. "Korfius?"

"Sorry. Your partner. He stays."

Collins attempted to control his response, but he couldn't conceal the horror he felt over this proposal. "No!"

"As collateral. To assure you take me to the right place and don't try to hold me prisoner."

Collins could understand why she might need such reassurance, but he could not afford to agree to it. "Release both of us or no deal."

Quinton ran her fingers lightly over her ruined cheeks, shuddering as she did so. "I can't agree to that."

"How do I know you'll release my friend, then?"

"How do I know you won't just kill me?" Quinton shrugged. "One of us will always have an edge. That's what brought us to negotiation in the first place. Since we captured you first, I think it's only fair that we have it."

Collins did not agree but saw no benefit to arguing the point. She did have the upper hand. "Maybe you could keep me instead. Is that enough of an edge?" The words came out before Collins could consider them, and he appreciated and cursed his own courage. Zylas would do a better job of leading Quinton to Prinivere, keeping both safe, and rescuing him afterward. Collins just did not know whether or not he would survive long with his identity revealed. *Longer than Zylas would.* Though Collins dreaded the thought of staying, he hoped Quinton would accept his sacrifice.

"Very noble of you."

"Thanks..."

"But no."

Hope died before Collins could even savor it. "No?"

"You take me; your friend stays."

"But—"

Quinton cut him off with a wave. "That's it."

Collins knew no argument would change her mind on the matter. If he became too insistent, she might figure out the true identity of the man she now believed was Korfius. "All... right," he finally said. "But, since you get the advantage, I get one more condition."

Quinton's brows beetled, a look that might once have made her look sensuously angry. Now, it made her features appear even more homely. "What?"

Collins minced his words. To speak them directly would expose his claim to have come to see her as a lie. "You'll... talk to me. See if we're still... compatible." He gauged her expression as he spoke,

pleased to find a glow coming to her ruined cheeks. "Tell me if and why you still want to stay in Barakhai and what's happened with your dragons."

Quinton stiffened. "My dragons?" she said, honing in on exactly the words Collins had tried to soften.

*Damn.* Collins nodded. "They're what was keeping you in Barakhai the last time we talked, remember? You're a geneticist." He reminded her of his own interest. "I'm a biologist. You were raising them, studying them, wanting to breed them eventually."

"Right." Quinton seemed to look through Collins, then her attention returned to him and she met his dark gaze with her icy blue stare. "And when I get my face back you'll... want me again?" The hardness left her eyes, replaced by a desire that seemed more grasping than sexual.

Collins approached her, winding his arms through the bars. He could not understand how the self-esteem of a woman as competent and beautiful as Carrie Quinton had been could hinge upon the interest of an undistinguished, plain-looking man like himself. *Is it real, or is she bluffing as much as I am?* "Come here."

Warily, the woman approached, allowing Collins to wrap his arms around her, to draw her face near his. He forced himself to keep his eyes open, to look upon the fleshy carnage he had wrought. "It's not your face I'm in love with." *Nor any part of you*, he added to himself, the only way he managed to force out such a heinous lie. His lips found hers, and he kissed her with all the passion he could muster. To his surprise, his young body responded even to this feigned ardor. "It doesn't matter to me if you never get restored. Looks don't matter," he repeated, "to a man in love."

Benton Collins hoped his own conscience would forgive him.

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## Chapter 6

THOUGH every second dragged like an hour, Benton Collins found himself outside with Carrie Quinton extraordinarily quickly. He could scarcely believe any bureaucracy could act so swiftly, yet they moved with a brisk and obedient efficiency that would startle any governing body of his world. Even so, the guards clearly disliked their duties. Each one gave Collins a narrow-eyed glare, and some whispered chilling threats against him and the partner he left behind should he fail to return Quinton in at least as good shape as he took her from them.

The day seemed too cheerful for the somberness of Collins' thoughts. The setting sun glared into his eyes and ignited chips of quartz like diamonds in the walls of the palace. The stretches of open pasture resembled a soft, emerald sea, and the animals that grazed it watched them with clear contentment. Only the horses gave them shrill, grating greetings, their ears flattened and their hooves grinding up clods of dirt. Several dogs followed them to the drawbridge, some snarling softly behind bared teeth; but none crossed the moat. At length, Collins found himself alone with Quinton and suddenly missed the animals and their hostility. At least, he did not have to carry on a dishonest conversation with them, heaping lie upon lie and hoping to remember all of them.

Quinton mirrored Collins' discomfort. A wary frown pinched her lips, and she glanced around them in every direction, as if expecting hordes of renegades to surround them at any moment. As she swung her head back and forth, the last rays of sunlight shimmered from hair as yellow and soft as corn silk. A bit behind her, ignoring the bald scars, Collins could almost imagine her as he had first seen her: a young

coed with dancing blue eyes, skin like cream, high-cheeked and full-lipped, with the body of an angel. Yet, he knew, madness tainted a beauty that, like the old sayings warned, lay only skin deep. She had seemed nice enough, but her upbringing had left her with a clingy desperate need for love. He did not want to betray her again, but, at some point, he would have to do so.

Quinton spun suddenly toward Collins, her face hidden by a fluttering, translucent veil. "You have to lead."

Collins hesitated, uncertain where to take her. Likely, Prinivere had moved since he had last seen her. She did not tend to stay in any one place long, and she had a massive network of renegade helpers to keep her safe. He knew the *durithrin* or *wild ones*, the creatures of the forest, reported to a kindhearted mouse/man named Vernon, who remained staunchly loyal to the dragon. Surely, some shrew, vole, or sparrow would observe and report them. He only hoped they would send help, rather than simply watch to see what they did and where they chose to go. Time, for Zylas, was running out.

The grassland turned to forest. They remained on the cleared pathway; and, as they slipped between the trees, Quinton took Collins' hand. Her palm felt small and smooth, her fingers clammy against his. The reason for her amiable gesture escaped him, and he muddled through a thousand explanations in an instant. *Is she holding on to slow any escape I might attempt? To keep her balance on uneven terrain? Is she really trying for reconciliation or playing into my own con? Or is this all just a part of her insanity?*

Collins gripped Quinton's hand firmly, protectively. She seemed small and helpless; though he knew her tall, slender figure hid a ticking time bomb. Though not physically powerful, she was clever and emotionally volatile, with the force of a king and a kingdom behind her. He wished he could love her enough to marry her. She deserved someone who could look past her injuries and bond with her soul, a mate who would forever find her the object of his desire. Although she apparently believed otherwise, that man was not Benton Collins, and he doubted even the right man would look beyond ruined features he had never seen at their best. Instinctively, Collins knew he belonged with someone else, and he was beginning to believe he might know who.

As it grew darker, Quinton took out a mag light, probably the one confiscated from Collins himself. Turning it on, she passed it to him to light their way.

"So," Quinton said suddenly, her voice startling in the otherwise silent woods. Her tone still contained a trace of hostile mistrust. "Who is this secret person who can fix my face?"

"You'll just have to wait until you meet..." Not wanting to reveal gender, he finished lamely, "... it."

Quinton pounced on the impropriety. "It?"

"I'm not giving anything away."

"No, you're not." Quinton's fingers tightened around his. "You're taking me to... it... anyway. What does it hurt to tell me now?"

Collins glanced through the trees, uncertain where to veer from the well-worn path. He wondered if the king's guards followed them stealthily through the underbrush and whether the renegades would notice and prepare for an ambush. He had escaped the only way he could conceive of and had not fully considered the danger he might inflict upon others. "It's not my right to give away anything. It's up to... it... to decide when and where to reveal... itself."

Quinton punched Collins in the shoulder with her free hand. Though clearly intended to seem playful, the gesture felt forced. "You're phenomenally weird, Ben Collins."

*Talk about the pot calling the kettle black,* Collins thought, but said only, "Thanks."

A sudden squawk shattered Collins' hearing and sent him skittering for cover, dragging Quinton with

him. Collins aimed the mag light toward the source of the sound. A blue and gold macaw that clambered beak over claw from a nearby trunk, dropped cautiously to the ground, then trotted toward them with a rolling gait.

Collins watched, trying not to laugh. "Aisa?"

"Who else?" the parrot said. She glided to his shoulder, a thousand times more graceful in the air than on the ground. "Where ya goin'?"

"I'm not sure," Collins admitted, swiveling his neck to look at her and finding one steel-blue eye boring into his. "I need to take Carrie to... the... elder."

Aisa squawked again, the sound ringing through Collins' ear long after it finished. He imagined owning such a bird as a pet might guarantee eventual deafness. "Who?" She fluffed up her feathers, tossing out a spray of dandrufflike dust.

"The elder," Collins repeated, using the term Vernon and Zylas had chosen when they had conversed about Prinivere for the first time in front of him, before he knew the details and they felt they could trust him.

Aisa scratched her head with one claw, loosing more parrot dust. "Who?" she repeated.

"Who? Who?" Quinton emitted a tight laugh, and Collins hoped that meant she was beginning to trust him. "Is that a parrot or an owl?"

Aisa made an affronted squeak. "I'm a blue and gold macaw."

"Yes," Collins said soothingly, "You're a blue and gold macaw, Aisa. A parrot. But I need to find..." Though he hated to give away anything, it seemed preferable to standing here trying to explain things to a bird with only partial overlap. "... the lady."

Quinton smiled with wicked triumph. "Ah, so we're a couple of X chromosomes closer to the truth."

Aisa cocked her head toward Quinton, fixing an eye on the woman.

Collins ran a gentle finger along Aisa's head, and her attention rotated back to him. Quinton carried a magical stone the renegades had given her on her arrival in Barakhai, when they had expected her to remain on their side. It translated for her, the way Prinivere's spell did for Collins; but he doubted the genetics concept came through clearly.

"Scratch backward. Feels best. Gets the itchy stuff off the new feathers."

Collins obeyed, carefully watching for the bird's reactions. He did not want to take a chance on losing a finger to a hard, black beak built for cracking nuts. He explored the hard, plastic-like prickles of new feather sheaths against his fingertips, and the bird lowered her head, twisting sideways, to enjoy the full effects of his grooming.

"Can you lead us to the lady?" Collins asked as he stroked.

"Oh, yes." The bird slurred, though whether in response to his ministrations or his inquiry, he did not know. Her head flicked toward Quinton in a not-so-subtle gesture, though she did not seem to have the words to ask the obvious question.

Collins doubted the bird could understand the subtleties of the situation in her current form. "She'll have to go with us."

Aisa flapped and screeched, clambering up and down Collins' arm twice before shooting between the trees.

Quinton watched her disappear among the branches, targeting the parrot's path with the mag light. "Walk this way?" she guessed.

Collins perverted the old Groucho Marx joke. "If I could walk that way, I wouldn't need a helicopter." He headed in the direction the macaw had taken, following the glimpses he got of the brilliant sapphire and amber feathers amidst the duller browns and greens of the forest.

Quinton laughed out some of the horrible tension that had existed between them since their reuniting. She took Collins' arm in both her hands as they walked. "I like a man with a sense of humor, even if he is wearing a dress and tights."

*She's flirting with me.* Collins could scarcely believe it, and that raised suspicion. *Is she playing me? Or just crazy.* He ran with the change, reinforcing it with more humor. He pretended to ash a cigar, still imitating Groucho, "And I like a woman who feeds me straight lines, especially if she's wearing a tight dress." He appreciated her softening attitude toward him but worried that it might abruptly degenerate into the same expectation of a lifetime relationship as it had before. *Not that I could wholly blame her. I started it this time with desperate talk of love and marriage.*

They found Aisa a short distance ahead, perched on a low branch. "Hello," she said in her gravely bird voice, flapped once, then took off again into the forest.

And so it went, the bird leading Collins and Quinton between the trees, the woman seeming to lose more of her inhibitions as anticipation overcame mistrust and anger, and Collins exhausting his repertoire of one-liners. Occasionally, they lost Aisa, but she always returned to lead them deeper between the packed trunks, intertwining bushes, and scraggly overgrowth.

Collins tried to avoid the plants he recognized as skin irritants, but those became too numerous to do much more than work to keep bare skin away from them. He hoped they would find a lake or clear stream near Prinivere's current cave so he could wash the oils from his face, hands, and hair; and that she would have brought his backpack so he could change his clothes. Despite his flippancy, he felt distinctly uncomfortable in woman's face and garb, especially speckled with bruises and smeared with poison ivy. He worried about Quinton's instability and changing moods; she seemed capable of flipping from love to hate, from kindness to cruelty in an instant. At least, he counted on Aisa's meandering route to confuse Quinton and any pursuers as much as it did him. He could not have found his way back should his life depend on it, which, he realized suddenly, it very well might.

At length, they came to a rocky cliff amidst all the plants. Aisa alighted on a shelf, flapped, and screeched out, "Wait here."

Collins found a large stone and sat. Something sharp poked his behind, and he leaped back to his feet almost immediately. He looked down, only to find his leggings and the lower half of his shift covered with burrs.

"What's wrong?" Quinton followed Collins' gaze. "Ouch."

Collins looked at her linen boots and dress, similarly decorated. "I guess we have something to do while we wait."

Quinton looked at her own clothes and groaned. "Why don't we start with the ones stabbing me in the butt?"

Walking behind his companion, Collins began prying out the pointy seeds with his thumb and first finger. He found long ones with a single barb in the tip and round ones, like puffer fish, with points in every direction. The former slid out easily with a single sharp tug. The latter tended to cling and to jab painfully into his fingertips with even a light pull.

When one of those became wedged under his nail, Collins jerked back with a curse. "Ouch, damn it!"

Quinton twisted her head around toward him but did not inquire about his welfare.

Collins cautiously closed his teeth around the burr clinging to his finger, ripping it free but leaving the



barbs deeply embedded. "I don't mind the little spears. But the caltrops really hurt."

"Spears? Caltrops?" Quinton shook her head with a sigh. "Leave it to a guy to weaponize even the most banal and benign."

"Benign, hell." Collins sucked on his sore finger. "Real caltrops may hurt more, but at least they don't leave shrapnel."

Quinton worked on the front of her clothing. "I think of them more as sewing needles and porcupines."

Collins nodded. The description seemed at least as apt. "You've got to admire their survival skills. I bet we spread their seeds over a mile."

"Just what we need. More spears and caltrops."

Collins looked at the ground, where trampled leaves and brush hid the burrs they had managed to dislodge. "You gather them up and throw them away. I'm not touching those things any more than I have to."

"Me, either." Quinton walked around Collins. "I guess it's only fair I get your back, too."

"Thanks." Collins hauled out as many burrs as he could from the front while Quinton attended his back. Believing he finally had her trust, he tried, "So, where are those little dragons anyway?"

Quinton jabbed him with a burr before removing it.

"Ow!"

"You know the deal. Healing first."

Collins could understand her reticence. "Yes, but—"

"And they may be young, but they're hardly 'little.'"

A man appeared. Thin, draped in an overlarge tunic and hose, with brown hair and a dark mustache, he wordlessly ushered the pair inside.

As Collins shut off the mag light, Quinton reached out and took it back from him.

It occurred to Collins suddenly that, if Aisa had held parrot form for at least the last hour, and that they had needed to use the mag light for even longer than that it had to be later than 10:00 p.m. *Less than two hours to rescue Zylas.* A wave of panic flashed through him, and all of the humor of the last few minutes seemed wasted.

A voice entered Collins' mind. *\*What's happening? Why did you bring her here?\**

Collins stiffened in surprise, then realized Prinivere hid not far from where he stood. He stifled the urge to look around for her. His searching might attract Quinton's attention, and he would not reveal the old dragon without permission. He concentrated on his thoughts, trying to give Prinivere a quick and dirty image of all that had transpired. *If you fix her face, she'll release Zylas and tell us where to find the dragons.* He recalled that Prinivere had once healed him after the king's guards had injured him and he had fallen down the stone stairs. She had managed it before she even had the enhancing crystal, stating that healing spells took less energy than most.

*\*Fix her face?\** Prinivere seemed stunned by the revelation. *\*Ben, I can't do that.\**

*I ruined it. It seems only fair—*

Prinivere broke in before he could finish the focused thought. *\*I don't mean I won't. I mean I can't. I'm not capable of doing such a thing.\**

Shocked, Collins did not consider his words carefully. *Are you kidding me? Of course you are!*

*You made me look like this.* He caught himself reaching toward his face and stopped his hands in mid-movement.

Apparently finished glancing around the craggy, empty room, Quinton jostled Collins' arm. "Why are we just standing here? What happens next?"

Startled from his mental conversation, it took Collins a moment to find his tongue. "We... we..." He licked his lips, summoning saliva in a mouth gone uncomfortably dry. "We—"

Prinivere continued the previous conversation, *\*Yours is illusion, not healing. It's temporary.\**

"We," Quinton prompted, seizing Collins' forearm. "We what?"

*\*If I could heal old wounds, Ben, don't you think I'd start with my own?\**

Collins remembered the ugly lines and puckers that marred the dragon's murky green scales, the ragged tail tip. The wounds she had healed for him had been fresh bruises, abrasions, and cuts.

Quinton's grip tightened, painful in its persistence. Caught in the middle, Collins froze, mind dangerously blank.

At that moment, a dog raced from the dark depths of the cave, barking a welcome that rang through the confined space. Collins recognized the voice, then the gangly form, an instant before it struck him full in the chest. Bowled over, he toppled, dragging Quinton down with him, Korfius lapping at his face.

Collins shoved the dog aside, thrusting a protective arm in front of his face. "Stop it! Down, Korfius." He used the opening to clamber to his feet, then offered Quinton a hand as the hound capered and pranced around him.

Quinton accepted Collins' hand but sprang to her feet without allowing him to carry more than a modicum of her weight. She struggled to readjust the veil.

"Korfius, no!" Collins put his most demanding tone into his voice. "Korfi—" Only then, his mistake struck him, and he looked at a brow-furrowed Quinton.

She voiced his worst fear. "So that's not Korfius in the dungeon."

Collins tried not to sound defensive. "I never said it was."

"You implied it." A dangerous edge entered Quinton's Lone.

"No." Collins would not allow himself to be bullied. He had made too many errors. "You assumed it."

"So, who is your partner in crime?"

Collins knew his answer, no matter how evasive or vague, would still give Quinton a clue. The more defensive he seemed, the more important the identity would grow until it became obvious. He shrugged, then smiled, trying to appear nonchalant and hoping Quinton would see it all as part of the continuing game. "You know the deal. Healing first." He squeezed Quinton's hand, still caught in his.

"That wasn't even part of the deal," she reminded.

"Exactly." Collins saw that as making *his* point.

"I thought you loved me."

"I do." Even though he had not spoken the actual words this time, Collins' response still stuck in his mouth, a chore to verbalize. "But my coconspirator might not." He took her into his arms, surprised to find himself aroused by her again despite his discomfort and dislike. She was still a beautifully contoured woman, soft and delicate against him. He hoped Prinivere saw through the necessary deceit, then realized she would also read his lust. Cheeks warming, he forced his thoughts away from his penis. "If I betrayed the trust of a friend, even to you, could you ever trust me again?" Now, Collins realized, he had placed

Quinton in a vulnerable position. If she pressed much further, she compromised the integrity of both of them.

Quinton pursed her lips. "I trusted the social workers who told me my mother could stop drugging and drinking and get her act together."

"You were four," Collins reminded. "And you didn't. After a year or so, you stopped believing them. Because they had violated your trust." He whispered directly into her ear. "I'm not going to do that." He meant that he would not reveal his jailed companion's identity; but, even as the words left his mouth, he realized she would take them a different way. She would see it as a promise never to betray her, a vow he had no intention of keeping. Eventually, she would learn that he did not love her, that he never had. *What have I done?* He refused to surrender to guilty contemplation. Zylas' safety had to take priority over Carrie Quinton's feelings, no matter how hard her past life or how deeply her hatreds festered.

Korfius' nails gouged Collins' leg.

"Ow!" Collins ripped from Quinton's embrace to turn his wrath on the dog. "Stop that! Bad dog."

Korfius lowered his head, ears flipped backward, and whined softly.

Thoughts of betrayal gave Collins an idea. *Lady, canyon hear me?*

*\*Certainly,\** Prinivere returned. *\*I just didn't want to interrupt.\** She added soothingly, *\*You're handling a tricky situation as well as an honest man can.\**

Though clearly meant as a compliment, the words fueled Collins' shame. *If you can still call me an honest man, you must have no idea what I'm thinking right now.*

*\*You want me to illusion her face to look as if I've healed it.\** As eerily as always, Prinivere had again accurately read his mind. *\*But I can't do that.\**

Frustration flooded Collins, along with a hint of relief. He had no other ideas, but he did not want to toy with Quinton any more than he already had. *Why not?*

*\*Because I never saw her before the accident I'd need to have studied her face to get it right, and...\** Prinivere's worried tirade ground to a halt as another idea formed in Collins' head. *\*But you have a solution to that, don't you?\**

Collins felt Quinton's warm presence beside him, simultaneously desirable and revolting. Korfius lay obediently at his heels, and he remembered the man who had led them into the cave who stood silently by the entrance. Aisa flew inside the cave behind them and settled on a rocky prominence. *It's called a photograph,* he explained. *An image of a person recorded at a certain point in time. Like a portrait, only instantaneously and exactly detailed.* The first time they met, Quinton had shown him the contents of her wallet to prove her identity, including her driver's license and student photo ID. She had no need to continue to carry it in Barakhai, but she might do it from habit or for a sense of security, the same way Collins had instinctively fastened his keys to his belt loop before heading to the portal.

Prinivere asked no further questions. Either she trusted Collins or gleaned enough from his thoughts to fully understand the concept. *\*If both of you concentrate on what she looked like, I should be able to put together a reasonably accurate likeness. But that photograph-thing would be better.\**

Collins addressed Quinton. "Would you happen to still have your wallet on you? The lady needs a picture."

Quinton glanced around the cave, surely seeking "the lady"; but, without some clue from Collins, she did not know where to look. He trusted the renegades to have hidden Prinivere reasonably well. The woman patted her left hip. "Strangely enough, I do have my wallet. I almost always do." Her lips framed a crooked smile of embarrassment. "I arrived here unexpectedly. And—"

Prinivere filled in a detail Collins had never considered. *\*She stopped herself from saying that she entered a third "world" as accidentally as this one.\**

Collins' eyes widened. Catching himself reacting to a nonverbal communication, he covered by rubbing his eyes. Once Quinton realized he had brought her into the presence of a mind reader without warning, all cooperation would end. *\*A third world? Where?\**

*\*That's all I could get. I only hear surface thoughts, and she's a particularly hard read.\**

Quinton finished, "—and I always worried I might step into some room or cave and find myself back..."

Collins naturally finished with "home," so Quinton's words caught him by surprise.

"where we came from." She turned a sheepish smile on him. "Silly, huh?"

So, *Barakhai is home now. And Algary is "that place we came from."* Collins said the necessary words. "Not silly at all. I'd probably do the same, if I had brought a wallet with me." He shrugged. "After losing everything on my last visit, I knew better than to bring it this time." Collins could not let Prinivere's revelation go. *A third world? Really? How many are there?*

*\*Only two that I know of.\** Despite the significance of their conversation, Prinivere redirected Collins to what currently mattered, *\*Take that wallet thing, and let's get going on this.\**

Deep in thought, Collins obeyed.

While Collins hurriedly changed into clean underwear, jeans, a T-shirt, socks, shoes, and his glasses, the unfamiliar man rigged a curtain across the back of the cave, with two slits that admitted the dragon's claws. It seemed safer to Collins to blindfold Carrie Quinton, but the magic required Prinivere to access all parts of the woman's face, including her eyes. He would also have preferred the task done while Prinivere held woman form, but they did not have time to quibble. Once she completed the process, he would count himself lucky to save Zylas before his switch.

As magic flowed from dragon to woman, and the harsh scars of Quinton's face faded to her normal, soft contours, Collins paced wildly. He knew the woman had mastered biology and would recognize that those claws belonged to nothing in their own world. Quinton had worked with the young dragons and would notice how the claws seemed more birdlike than mammalian, their size and shape, the lack of anything resembling paw pads. Others might wonder, but Quinton would know a dragon had healed her and might report that fact to the king.

*Stop worrying. They already know we have a dragon.* He took momentary satisfaction from the image of Prinivere plunging down on the soldiers at the portal entrance, their disciplined ranks exploding into screaming chaos. As terrifying as he had found the situation, they must have found it doubly so, since they had no reason to believe the creatures still existed. He could liken it to warriors on a battlefield suddenly menaced by a pterodactyl, but that would not catch the full scope of these men's experience. At least the men of the twenty-first century had seen *747s* and *Jurassic Park* movies.

Korfius trotted at Collins' side, invigorated by the constant movement of the master who would not be comforted. The only one who might have the right words to calm him was too engrossed in the process to speak them. Aisa watched with uncharacteristic quietness, letting out only an occasional soft grunt, her head feathers ruffled like a hatchling's.

Collins glanced at his wrist repeatedly, each time remembering that he had not taken the time to riffle through his pack for his watch. Now, he felt lost without it, at the mercy of circumstances and a nonsensical world that violated many of the tenets he relied on as facts. His mind edged back to the day an avowed Catholic coworker had argued with his father, a balding, conservative man of few words. "After all," the Catholic had argued haughtily, "evolution is only a theory." James Collins had ended the conversation with a gruff: "So's gravity, but I wouldn't go jumping out any windows." Now, huge men

morphed into tiny mice, four-legged dragons bore wings that could support their massive weight, and animals shared a digestive system with their human alter egos. Gravity seemed like the only scientific principle Benton Collins could still count on.

"How's that?" Aisa said suddenly, and Collins jumped at the coarse sound. He whipped his attention toward the blue and gold macaw who stood with her head cocked, one eye fixed on Quinton, the pupil widening and contracting in an instant. The reek of ozone filled the air.

Collins guessed the question actually came from Prinivere, though she must have thought it wiser to direct her mental communication solely at Aisa. If the dragon had a physical voice, Collins had never heard it. He peered around the women to look. Quinton's features closely resembled those he remembered, minus a year or two of age. "Beautiful. Perfect." He smiled encouragingly.

Quinton pulled a small mirror from her pocket and examined Prinivere's handiwork from every angle. She made a few suggestions regarding cheek apples and eyebrow widths that made little sense to Collins but sent the dragon's claws diligently back to work on her face. The odor thickened, and a bright series of sparks rose from the contact.

Collins' pacing grew more frantic as he worried about the time. Once the kingdom realized who it had imprisoned, even Carrie Quinton might not be able to talk them into releasing Zylas.

Again, Quinton examined her face and again found faults that seemed meaningless and miniscule to Collins. He could not understand why the woman could not just appreciate the second chance at normalcy that Prinivere's magic granted her, why she had to pick and poke at every detail.

During one of Quinton's surveys, Prinivere explained. *\*She sees this as her only salvation and doesn't want to regret anything about it.\** The dragon gave Collins an intangible smile. *\*Let her be as fussy as she needs to. We don't get many second chances in life.\**

Collins nodded in understanding, though he barely did. Time constraints weighed heavily on his soul, and hardly noticeable details seemed all the more ludicrous since he knew it was all a temporary illusion. Only then, he recalled his own changed features and wondered how difficult Quinton had found it to take the hand, arm, and embrace of a man who was currently a dead ringer for a female guard. *Maybe that's why she could do it. My changed appearance allowed her to put aside that I'm the one she hates most in all the worlds.*

*\*I'm concerned about time, too,\** Prinivere sent to the earlier parts of Collins' thoughts. *\*But to rush her would arouse suspicions we can't afford.\**

Collins had to agree, though he did not like it. He needed not only to convince Quinton of the dragon's ability to permanently heal her, he needed to act as if he believed it, too.

Before Collins could reply, Prinivere directed her attention back to Quinton, erasing lines and blemishes invisible to Collins' eyes. He sighed deeply and resumed his pacing.

At length, Quinton finally seemed satisfied. She studied her face in the mirror from every angle, reaching to touch her cheek with an expression of perfect awe.

Remembering Zylas' warning about touching, Collins caught Quinton's hand. "Don't mess with it." Needing a reason besides exposing the illusion, he added, "It has to... to set." Collins hoped that did not sound suspicious or stupid.

Quinton lowered her hand and smiled.

Collins found himself staring into a face so gorgeous it left him speechless. The first time he had looked upon Carrie Quinton, he had believed her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Now, his jaw sagged open as he looked upon features brought to smooth, unwavering perfection.

*\*Wow?\** Prinivere supplied.

"Wow," Collins forced out. "You're... you're... absolutely..."

Now it was Quinton's turn to supply him with words. "Hot?"

Collins continued to stare. "Hotter than hot. You're drop-dead stunning."

The grin broadened. "Apparently so."

Collins shook free of his trance. "Let's go."

Quinton's smile disappeared. "That's it? You're pretty, let's go?"

*\*Careful,\** Prinivere sent.

Worried about what the old dragon might have read, Collins jerked his attention to her. *What? Is she thinking something... dangerous?*

Prinivere's thoughts seemed slowed, vexed. *\*I only get what's on the surface,\** she reminded. *\*And that's tied up with excitement, curiosity, seeking a perfection that goes way beyond matching what she had. Deep down, that girl's a volcano.\**

Quinton concerned Collins as well, a boiling well spring of hatred, mistrust, and need veiled with a thin veneer. *I'll be careful But we have to go now. It's got to be close to midnight.*

*\*Dangerously close,\** Prinivere admitted. *\*Go and Godspeed.\**

Collins had never understood that expression, and it troubled him doubly now. He had never heard any person in Barakhai mention a deity; and, for the first time, he wondered if they even had religion. Given the inherently magical nature of nearly all the people here, seeking divine explanations for the lesser mysteries of the universe seemed unnecessary. Though no more eerie than many of the other oddities of this place, the lack of a formal system of beliefs gave Collins goose bumps; he had never been anywhere where religion did not play a major role in society. He wondered what Prinivere had actually said and why the spell had translated it into "Godspeed" rather than "good luck" or something equally banal. Now, however, did not seem the time for an explanation. Clutching Quinton's hand more firmly, Collins steered her toward the cave mouth. "Now can we save my companion, sweetheart?"

"Of course," Quinton studied her reflection in the hand mirror, lips taut as she clearly battled the urge to touch it. Her fingers twitched in his, and her free hand fluttered near her face as if to brush away a few errant strands of hair.

*\*The young dragons,\** Prinivere reminded him. *\*Where are they?\**

Though Collins hated to leap directly into all parts of Quinton's promise so soon after honoring his own, he knew it safer to hear the information in front of others. That way, if something happened to him, the renegades could still rescue the young ones. Also, Prinivere would know if Quinton described some place that did not exist, and he could threaten to take back her new features while still in the presence of the one who had crafted them. *An illusionary place.* Collins grimaced. *Togo with her illusionary face.* "So—where are the dragons?"

Quinton sighed, clearly unhappy with Collins' decision to ply her for information before taking sufficient time to adore her. "They're dead."

Collins stiffened, every muscle frozen in terror.

*\*She's lying.\**

Collins did not take the time to delicately rephrase Prinivere's discovery. "You're lying."

Quinton jammed her hands onto her hips, her new features twisting in affronted anger. Somehow, she managed to make flawless features turn ugly. "How dare you!"

Collins could not afford to give ground, nor waste time. "I dare because you promised me the truth."

He put his face nearly against hers and tried to look deeply wounded.

"They're dead. Why won't you believe me?" Quinton sounded so sincere, Collins would have believed her had he not had Prinivere to tell him the truth.

Collins sighed deeply, lowered his head, then shook it sadly. He made a throwaway gesture at the curtain. "I'm sorry I wasted your time. Put back the old face."

"Wait!" Quinton squeaked. She glanced around the cave, from the man waiting quietly in the darkness at its mouth, to Aisa, to the faceless claws poking through the curtain. "I promised to tell you. Not the whole world."

Collins saw no reason to argue. So long as Quinton told him within range of Prinivere's mind reading, she would hear, too. "Whisper it." He tipped his head toward her.

"You're the only one who knows this, and you have to promise not to tell a soul."

"I promise." Collins nodded, saved by a technicality. Prinivere would learn it from Quinton, and no similar vow bound the old dragon to silence.

Quinton placed her mouth over Collins' ear. "Cavern. South of Pashtir, west of the Uraffs, north of the Kastarnin Sea."

The directions sounded impossibly vague to Collins. *Do you know where that is?*

*\*I know.\** A hint of discomfort entered Prinivere's sending, but she did not elaborate. *\*Now go save Zylas.\**

"Oh." Collins did not have to feign confusion. He had heard of none of the places Quinton had named. Shrugging, he hauled her toward the exit, Korfius eagerly following.

Quinton lost her grip on the mirror, hobbled it, then caught it before it hit the stony ground. She returned it to her dress. "Whoa, Ben. What's the hurry?"

"The hurry is a locked up friend. Once we free him..." Collins pressed his body against Quinton's. "I'll be able to give you my *full* attention." He raised and lowered his brows in an exaggerated motion, emphasizing the innuendo.

Quinton snorted. "I'm gorgeous again, remember? I can do a hell of a lot better than you."

Though not wholly certain Quinton was joking, Collins bantered. "You think so? How are you going to do better than the best?"

"The best? You?"

Collins continued to steer Quinton toward the exit, trying to figure out how to rid himself of the dog. "Best in Barakhai, anyway. I've got the highest education. A driver's license." He added with a scratch. "No fleas."

"No fleas? How endearing. And I've got my own driver's license—not worth the plastic it's printed on here."

"Oh, yeah? Well, I'd venture to guess, I'm the only one with a Snickers bar."

Quinton whirled. "Oooh, really? You've got candy?" Her eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. "That's not just another name for your... manhood, is it?"

Despite his urgency, Collins huffed out a laugh. "No. I have real candy, and a few other luxuries from home." He hissed in her ear, "But my... manhood is pretty sweet, too."

Quinton slapped him, harder than flirtation demanded, then ran from the cave.

Rubbing his cheek, Collins stopped at the opening. "Stay, Korfius."

The hound ignored him, tail waving, waiting for his master to move.

*\*I don't think it'll hurt to take him with you.\**

Collins had never considered doing such a thing, accustomed to leaving the dog in his room while he attended classes. The over eager animal seemed worse than useless in a dangerous situation. *You don't think he'll be in any danger?*

*\*No more than with me. He really misses you, and he can run for help if you get in trouble.\**

Collins doubted Korfius would know how to bring help. He seemed more the type of dog who would dote on thieves and murderers, so long as they were human or carried biscuits. Nevertheless, Collins considered the possibility the dog might help him in a violent situation, and he could not deny that Korfius *had* brought people to save him when he returned to Daubert Labs badly injured. Besides, Collins would not gainsay Prinivere. Without argument, he followed Quinton into the night.

Korfius bounced after them, tail waving.

Moonlight sheened from Quinton's tresses, glinting like metallic gold. Her step turned light and happy, and she consulted her mirror often, though she had to hold it nearly to her nose to see. Collins did not attempt to distract her, though he felt a fiery pang of guilt every time a smile of recognition stretched her lips. The higher joy buoyed her, the lower she would crash when the illusion decayed, leaving the scarred, withered cheeks and bald spots in its place. For Zylas' sake, he had no choice but to continue the charade. The life of a friend had to take precedence over the happiness of a self-sworn enemy.

The cloud cover unraveled, revealing a nearly full moon that obviated the need for the mag light. Nevertheless, the walk back felt twice as long as the one to Prinivere, though Collins had not known her location at the time nor had the full visual clarity his glasses provided now. Every pause Quinton took to stare at her reflection felt like an eternity, an intolerable delay from rescuing Zylas before his change overtook him; yet Collins could not find a way to rush her without admitting to his friend's identity or seeming utterly insensitive to the needs of a woman he claimed to love. *Love*, he considered, uncertain of its meaning. He had believed his parents the very definition until their divorce and personal quests for new companionship left him feeling orphaned. Love certainly did not describe the feelings he had for Carrie Quinton. If his last relationship, with Marlys Johnson, had taught him nothing else, it was that devotion without respect, without trust, was meaningless. Quinton's attitude did not evoke admiration, and he doubted she thought all that much of his abilities either.

The castle came into view, and sudden anxiety overtook Collins. He had many had memories of that place and only a few good ones. "Come on," Quinton pulled playfully at his arm. Korfius barked.

Collins eased free of her grip and patted the dog. "I'll wait here. After you've let my friend loose and had a chance to explain me, I'll meet up with you again."

Quinton gave Collins a pouting, doubtful look. "It'll be all right."

"I don't think so." If the guards grabbed Collins, he would find himself in a worse situation than when he had started: not only would he and Zylas both be prisoners but Korfius as well. "I think I'm better here, thank you."

Quinton plastered herself against Collins. Even through the fabric of her dress, he could make out the gentle contours; and they excited him wildly. "Are you sure?"

Collins kept his voice steady, willing it not to crack. He could feel the imprint of a nipple on Ms arm. "I'm sure. We can do... that... after."

"Assuming my offer still stands," she teased.

Collins could not afford to give in to desire. He nodded, squirming free of her embrace. "I think it will." It took a monumental effort of will to add the necessary confidence to the claim. He barely



considered his looks ordinary, even when not illusioned into those of an unpleasant woman. He knew an intelligent beauty like Quinton, until the burns, could have had anyone she wanted. "I really think it will."

A flash resembling anger passed through Quinton's eyes, then disappeared. If Collins had interpreted correctly, though, she gave no sign of it in her tone, which remained upbeat. "I think you're being silly, but what can I say?"

"Better silly than sorry, right?"

"If you say so." Quinton turned on her heel and strode toward the castle, jiggling her hips and well-shaped buttocks as she moved.

Collins watched her walk quickly across a grazing field still dotted with animals despite the late hour. Korfius wormed his head under Collins' sagging left hand and sat.

A voice emerged from a nearby copse of weeds. "I hate her."

Korfius barked madly at the newcomer. Equally surprised, Collins whirled to face Falima. The deeply tanned, black-haired woman melded easily with the darkness; and her blue eyes, several shades darker than Quinton's, narrowed menacingly.

Korfius' wild greeting dropped to a soft whine, and his tail waved into a blur of recognition. He ran to her, crashing through the weeds to lie at her feet.

Collins desperately hoped Falima had not seen the flirting between him and Quinton. "How... how long... were you there?"

"Long enough to see her try to trick you back into captivity." Falima fumed, still watching after Quinton's retreating form. "I've been waiting for you since I left switch-form. I assume Aisa got you back to the lady by the new look of Carriequinton's face."

Collins continued to watch Quinton until she disappeared into the outer courtyard, then turned his full attention on Falima. "Is Zylas all right?"

Falima ran a hand through her tousled black mane. "I don't know. Last report was just after Ialin switched."

Collins nodded his understanding. He now remembered that the hummingbird became human at around 9:00 p.m., which made him the perfect partner for Aisa. They changed at exactly opposite times, with no human intersection, which would make it harder to share information, especially when Ialin took bird form and Aisa woman. However, at all times, one of them could fly.

"Then, Vernon went in after his change, which was a pretty critical time."

Collins' chest clutched. Vernon's and Zylas' switch times perfectly corresponded, which had allowed them to become the best of friends. *So it's after midnight We're too late. They know!*

Falima seemed oblivious to Collins' alarm. "Of course, without Zylas, we'll need the lady to communicate with Vernon."

*King Terrin knows he has Zylas!*

"We worked out some basic signals, but his overlap's not perfect and the code doesn't cover much."

Collins felt himself trembling, and not only from the cold night air. "Maybe I... should have gone with Carrie."

Korfius whined and slunk back to Collins, who patted the dog comfortingly.

Falima frowned, shook her head. Though not the classically beautiful model type that Quinton typified, she had a more honest, exotic attractiveness that Collins preferred. "If she deals fairly, she'll release Zylas with or without you. If not, she would still have Zylas. And you, too."

Collins nodded. He had come to the same conclusion, but a stifling guilt crept over him now. He could not help reliving the moment in the keep when he had seen his reflection in the mirror and believed his disguise had fallen. His panic had caused their capture. If he had kept his cool, they might have escaped unscathed. If not for him, Zylas would be relaxing now in the safety of some cave, regaling the renegades with modest tales of their adventure, teasing Collins about his oddly uncanny ability to play a girl. Unlike his illusion, Quinton's had held up under the reflected scrutiny of her hand mirror, which meant either his imagination had run amok or the mirror in Quinton's closet held some secret he had no means to understand at the present time.

Brush rattled, then a slight, androgynous man skittered into the clearing. Though short, his coffee-colored hair fell in shaggy disarray around finely chiseled, angular features. His small, delicate form belied a personality that Collins knew could become stolid and dangerously hostile.

Falima seized the man's arm. "Ialin, what's wrong."

Ialin glanced from the clearing, to his companions, to the castle and back, never still. "Run. Run now. Guards... they've come to kill you."

Collins had followed Ialin's glance to the castle. When he returned his attention to the hummingbird/man, he found the dark gaze directly on him. "Me?" he blurted without thinking. For some reason, he had believed the comment addressed to Falima.

In response, Ialin rolled his eyes.

Though Collins knew it only made him look even less intelligent to Ialin, he had to question. "How do you know they're planning to kill me? Maybe they just want to take me to the castle, like Carrie asked."

"Maybe," Ialin said, hopping from foot to foot. Collins had recently read that fidgeting burned a significant number of calories. Knowing that, it seemed a wonder Ialin managed to weigh anything at all. Ialin's lids narrowed to slits. "If you don't mind them carrying you there by spears stabbed through your neck, heart, gut, and groin."

Collins could not keep his mind from conjuring the image of his impaled body held triumphantly overhead by four guards splattered with his dripping blood. He grimaced, banishing the mental image. "That doesn't sound like a welcoming party," he admitted. "But are you sure?"

"He's sure." Falima grabbed Collins' wrist and jerked him back the way he had come. "We need to get out of here. Fast."

Off-balanced by the unexpected maneuver, Collins staggered after his companions. "What about Vernon?"

Falima quickened her pace, half-dragging Collins behind her. "He'll be fine. Come on."

Collins gathered his legs and kept pace with his long-legged companion and their flirty friend. Korfius bounded along beside him, tugging at his pants, apparently believing the whole situation a game. In that moment, Collins suddenly understood Korfius' preference to remain a dog full-time, the world simplified to solid blacks and whites, purged of anything gray.

Shortly, Collins realized they took a different route than the one he and Quinton had used. "Where are we going?" he huffed out as he ran.

The Barakhains exchanged glances but did not answer. They continued to plow through the brush and trees, dodging copses, leaping brambles, and treading lightly on the piled leaves. The more carefully Collins tried to place his steps, the more mold he plowed up with every step. He soon gave up and abandoned the effort, concentrating more on forward movement and not losing the companions who seemed to know where they were going. Or *maybe they're counting on me to let them know if they go the wrong way*. The thought became an obsession. Though silence seemed safer, he addressed

Falima. "I can take you where I last saw... the lady."

Before Falima could answer, Ialin snapped. "She's not there anymore. That Carriequinton bitch gave away her position to the guards, too. Even if we hadn't warned ahead, the lady's smart enough to move."

As the forest scrolled past Collins, branches battering his face at irregular intervals, he took slight solace in the realization that the twigs hit the illusion of Orna first, though they still hurt. He imagined Ialin had not actually used "bitch," given the dearth of Barakhain animal slang, but something similarly derogatory. *Move, all right. But where?* This time, he did not speak the words aloud. Either his companions knew and would drag him there or they would head for a safe hiding place and let the dragon find them. The renegades excelled at hide-and-seek despite the royal family's dog and horse advantage. They had played it with great success since long before Collins' arrival, and his constant questioning could only make their jobs more difficult. Benton Collins closed his mouth. And ran.

Soon, the route grew more difficult, sending him scrambling through a blackberry net that seemed more cave than copse. On hands and knees, or sometimes on his belly, he crawled and slithered through the mess of vines, ignoring the thorns that stabbed his sides and tore bits of flesh from his ears. At last, his companions took to the treetops, swinging like monkeys through the vines. Forced to carry Korfius, tired from his previous trip, Collins found himself hard-pressed to follow, even when Falima backed up to help him with the dog. At one point, exhausted and dripping sweat, he paused to use the high vantage to look out over the forest for pursuit. Though he saw none, it didn't really reassure him. The guards had expected to find him waiting and willing, a sitting target. When they discovered him missing, they would have had to assemble dogs and horses, a task that might not have taken long, but would have widened the renegades' lead considerably. He only hoped their tactics would fool the tracking animals.

Finally, Ialin swung to the ground, prancing in anxious circles while Falima and Collins eased Korfius down. The dog planted his paws on the dirt, broad-based and rocksteady while the man and woman skittered down after him.

"We need to move," Ialin reminded.

Falima made a wordless gesture to indicate that he should continue to lead rather than discussing the matter.

Ialin darted deeper into the woods.

Back on sturdy footing, Collins found himself capable of focusing on things other than just trying to follow and keep up with his companions. The clean foliage odors of the trees and brambles mingled with a shifting taint of rotting evergreen and mold. An occasional whiff of musk carried to him as they, or the breezes, moved, though whether from a skunk, fox, or weasel he could not tell. The world became a quilt of patchy greens: ranging from a deep olive to brilliant aqua and emerald. Stalk browns muted from the usual invisible dull support to a vivid color contrast as beautiful as any of the geometric panoramas formed by flowers, shoots, and leaves.

Cold points of water stung Collins' face. He jerked backward, only then noticing a thin stream meandering through the forest. His friends waded through it, the dog romping amid a wild spray of water.

Ialin growled through gritted teeth. "Korfius, no! It doesn't do us any good to hide our scent in water, if you're splashing it all over the banks."

Korfius whined. His head and tail drooped, and each step became a concentrated, deliberate movement, as if mimicking a gaited horse.

Apparently satisfied, Ialin went back to leading their scraggly band through the water. Though hating the idea, Collins placed a foot into the stream. Icy water rushed into his forty-dollar Nike rip-off, chilling his ankle through his sock. He followed Falima who glanced curiously back at him at intervals. Her wood and cloth sandals surely afforded no protection against the cold, but at least they did not act like sponges.

As Collins' toes grew number, his feet began to feel like boulders, sucking up as much of the stream as possible and driving his running shoes deep into the mucky silt.

Ialin plunged a hand into the water, then removed it, grinning and clutching a fish. "Got one." He took a bite from the wriggling tail.

It was all Collins could do not to throw up. Grimly, he turned his attention directly on Falima and concentrated on the soaked and grimy mass his socks had become inside his shoes. Suddenly, he thought of the mouse again. "Are you sure Vernon's all right?"

"He's Aisa's charge." Ialin spoke around a mouthful of some fish part Collins did not want to recognize. He had eaten sushi and liked it well enough, but he wondered how the Barakhain got around all the tiny bones. "You're mine."

"Aisa's?" Collins had last seen the parrot in the company of Prinivere, though he supposed she could easily have followed Carrie Quinton and himself without their knowledge. The renegades had surprised him so many times, he had begun to believe they used him for sneaking-up-on practice. He discarded the thought, suspecting that spending half their lives as animals and a chronic need to dodge danger simply made them more cautious than the average man on the American streets. *At least before September 11th.*

"Aisa's," Ialin repeated, though Collins' thoughts had gone way past the original question. "We thought it logical to give the inexperienced man to the man and the mouse to the bird big enough to carry him. But silly us. What do we know about strategy?"

Already tired of Ialin's hostility, Collins defended himself. "I wasn't questioning your perfectly perfect plan, Mister Perfection. I just didn't know Aisa had made it back here, yet. Is that all right with you?"

Ialin glanced at Collins over his shoulder, his lips bowed into a smile. "I suppose 'Mister Perfection' can live with that explanation." He went back to leading, and Falima turned to wink at Collins.

Collins shrugged. Ordinarily, self-doubt and politeness would have kept him from such a tirade; but his filthy, water-saturated, boulderlike shoes worried at his patience and mood. He understood the need for diversionary tactics, but it seemed more logical to get to Prinivere as swiftly as possible. Once they climbed on her back, she could fly anywhere and no dog could ever pick up the scent from there. Collins did not voice his opinion, however, as he harbored no wish for Ialin to belittle him in front of Falima again. He did not care what the hummingbird/man thought of him, but Falima's opinion mattered deeply.

At length, Ialin hopped from the stream to a rock, then to another farther away, and finally to the stony ledge of a hill tucked into a tangle of forest. Falima performed the same maneuver, then Korfius bounded after them. Collins leaped heavily to the first stone, throwing out his arms for balance. Water squirted from his running shoe, spilling in rivulets down the gray face. He jumped to the next rock, his shoes sloshing.

Ialin said nothing, though his head waggled disapprovingly at Collins' gracelessness. Ordinarily, Collins could make those jumps with ease, but the loads of water he carried like cement blocks turned the task into a monumental undertaking. If he ever came back to this magical world, he vowed, he would wear waterproof boots. Eventually, he straggled to the ledge, hoping they had reached the end of their journey.

Ialin wandered around the hill, then disappeared.

Falima took Collins' hand to lead him into the cave opening he had, once again, not previously noticed. Korfius wriggled between them and rushed into the cave, the humans following. This one was smaller than the previous ones had been, its edges worn smooth, with moss and tiny plants lining every crack. Prinivere took up most of the space, and Collins saw no supplies, such as the usual chests. He wondered how many safe houses the renegades had and how they communicated where to find

Prinivere, their gear, and one another.

*\*A lot,\** Prinivere sent. *\*We've practiced a long time and have a lot of spies.\**

Collins drew up his left foot and removed his shoe, pouring several ounces of water onto the dirt floor. It disappeared quickly, soaking into the soil, leaving him with a slimy sock that had once been white. Hopping on his squishy right running shoe, he removed the sock, tossed it to the ground, and started on the other shoe.

"My lady." Ialin made a swift, slight bow. "As soon as Carriequinton got back to the castle, she sent a contingent of guards out to kill him." He gestured at Collins, who continued to hop around the cave, now on his bare left foot.

Prinivere lowered her scaly head. *\*I know, Aisa brought the news. I sent her to check on the caverns, see if Carrie lied about them, too.\**

Collins paused to dump the water from his muddy right shoe.

The dragon's massive head swung toward Collins. Miss's *gone to check where Carrie said they hid the dragon kits.\**

Ialin gave Prinivere an earnest look as Falima came up beside Collins and put a hand on his shoulder to steady him while he removed his other sock. Collins guessed the hummingbird/man addressed the dragon in thought, perhaps to warn her not to say too much in the presence of one he still did not wholly trust.

Prinivere returned with a communication they could all hear. *\*He needs to know, Ialin. He's the only one who can get inside.\**

Collins froze in mid-motion, the grubby, sodden sock dangling from his hand. "Are you saying I've got to sneak into the royal chambers? Again?" He touched his face with his free hand. "How many times can we pull that off?"

*\*You don't have to go back there.\**

Ialin added, "And your face is back to normal, by the way."

Falima squeezed Collins' shoulder. "Dirt-streaked and tired, but normal."

*Good.* Collins wondered how long Quinton's illusion would last and how much worse she could do to him when it failed. Though her double cross had caught him by surprise, he could not wholly condemn it. After all, he had deceived her, too. In fact, he found her betrayal a bit of a relief, easing some of the guilt of his own.

Though Collins now stood squarely on bare feet, Falima still held his shoulder as she asked, "Did Aisa get Vernon out safely?"

*\*He's with me,\** Prinivere confirmed. *\*From what I can get, the royals have identified Zylas. Then, Carrie Quinton ordered Ben killed and locked up Zylas.\**

Collins wriggled feet becoming dangerously cold and wondered where they had left his backpack. "Locked him up? He was already locked up." He glanced directly at Falima, then at Ialin from the corner of his eye, wondering if he had missed something. The woman nodded agreement, and even Ialin seemed interested in the answer.

*\*In a rat-sized cage.\**

Falima gasped; and, this time, Collins knew he had failed to consider something important. He kept his mouth shut, hoping it would come out in context, but he could not help wondering, *What? Is he a claustrophobic rat?*

*\*At noon...\** Prinivere started, then left Collins to finish.

"He turns into a human and... and what happens?"

Ialin said gruffly, "If the iron's sturdy enough, it crushes him dead."

Something wet splashed Collins' cheek, and he glanced at Falima. Spidery red lines wound through her eyes, the lids half-closed in pain.

"Not Zylas." Collins put a comforting arm around Falima, and she folded against him. Though well-muscled, she felt strangely small and helpless to Collins, who could never have imagined her surrendering to despair. He wondered if her relationship with the albino went deeper than he had known, despite the vast difference in their ages, surprised to suffer a flare of jealousy. He could no longer deny his feelings for her. He drew himself up, willing a determination he did not feel. "So we have to rescue him before noon tomorrow." He shrugged, as if it were the simplest matter in the world. "We can do that."

Ialin nodded, though the gesture seemed more habitual than reassuring. He had clearly weathered a lot for this cause, and it never seemed to end.

*\*You still have the right to go home whenever you wish. You don't have to risk yourself for this.\**

Though cautiously sent and clearly intended out of fairness, Prinivere's reminder irritated Collins. He turned on the dragon with a tone that surely baffled his companions, who had not received the message. "I'm not going anywhere till I know Zylas is safe. I got him into this mess—"

Falima interrupted, "No, he got himself into it. He insisted on going, and—"

"It was my fault." Collins' voice cracked, and he felt tears building, "I got us caught. I did something very very stupid."

Ialin's head rose and swiveled toward Collins. His expression still presented an image of sorrow, but his eyes gained the stormy darkness that had become so familiar to Collins. Even Falima stiffened.

"There's a mirror in Carrie's room. It reflected me as me—the real me, not the illusion. I thought the disguise had worn off. I... thought my cover... gone, and I panicked. I didn't think things through clearly and... " Collins swallowed hard, and the tears dribbled down his cheeks. "I'm sorry." Now, he could almost feel Prinivere scanning his mind for details.

*\*A mirror that sees through illusions is magical.\**

"Clearly." Ialin scratched his head, rearranging the disarray of his hair into further chaos. "But why would Carriekinton have such a thing?"

Prinivere squinted, and her eyes disappeared amidst the scaly folds of her aged face. *\*Seeing through illusions may not be its primary power. Any magical mirror would cut through to the truth.\**

Falima removed her hand from Collins, using the back to wipe tears from her cheeks. "So what's the real purpose of this thing likely to be?"

Collins appreciated that the conversation had gone from his blunder to the significance of the mirror. "If I had to guess, I'd bet it shows her face the way it used to look."

*\*Very likely.\** Though Prinivere agreed with Collins' assessment, she still appeared pensive, eyes lost amid the wrinkles. *\*Though that, too, might simply be a function of it being magical. It might not have anything to do with its intended purpose when it got magicked.\**

Ialin made a thoughtful noise. "So, if it has another power, Carrie might not even know about it."

Now Collins frowned. As a scientist, he would examine and experiment with that mirror until he

discovered its every secret. He doubted Quinton would have done less. "In any case, is it more likely to give away that her facial repairs are illusion? Or to show her her original face before the scars?"

*\*I... don't know,\** the dragon admitted. *\*This is a distinctly unusual circumstance. If I had it here to examine...\**

Stepping out of Collins' embrace, Falima continued to mop up tears with her sleeve. She had seen Quinton's repaired features and had, apparently, figured out the rest by context. "Carriequinton obviously never planned to cooperate with us anyway, so it hardly matters when she realizes we tricked her."

*We?* Collins appreciated that Falima accepted his deceit as a group decision. It made him feel like an integral part of the renegade operation, though he suspected her word choice had more to do with the fact that Prinivere had decided to assist in the duplicity. In college, he had supported liberal causes with the unambiguous moral certainty only a neophyte to the big bad world could muster.

As his personal burdens grew heavier, he had become essentially apolitical. He wondered what his friends and family would think if they knew he had deliberately embroiled himself in the sticky and perilously deadly affairs of another world.

Prinivere opened her enormous green eyes and rolled her gaze toward Falima. *\*I'm not so certain she never intended to cooperate. She did trust Ben enough to come with him alone. And she did eventually tell us where to find the dragons.\**

Collins shook his head, having difficulty making sense of the matter. "Why would she tell me, then try to have me killed?"

Falima and Ialin remained silent, without the necessary information to participate fully in the conversation.

Prinivere paced out a cautious circle and lay back down in a new position. *\*She whispered the directions in your ear, remember? Then you left right away, without the chance to tell anyone else. Once you died, you couldn't pass it on. Or, if you lived, she figured you'd forget all those unfamiliar names before you could pass them along.\**

Collins realized he already had.

*\*Even if you remembered, she knew it wouldn't do us any good.\**

Collins recalled the earlier, unfinished conversation. "Because this place is warded *against* switchers?" A light dawned. *That's got to be the place Carrie considered a "third world."*

*\*Right.\**

"Why?"

Prinivere glanced at Ialin, who sighed, shrugged, then nodded wearily. Not long ago, he had cautioned the dragon not to tell Collins about this place at all and now she had passed him the job. "Because it's basically a dungeon, and a long-ago king worried that people might either try to release prisoners or blunder in and get themselves killed. The warding works both ways, so it also kept the prisoners from escaping."

Collins paused to consider the words before asking any questions. The more he figured out on his own, the less Ialin would judge him. He knew the king had never warded his dungeon in a similar way, if for no other reason than that it would also exclude guards. However, the current king had nothing to do with the magic that kept switchers from the royal bedchambers either. In fact, he had written decrees banning the possession or use of magic by anyone in the kingdom, which suggested he might not know about Quinton's mirror and explained why she kept it hidden in the wardrobe. He guessed some ancient king had wanted prisoners housed farther from the castle while later ones preferred to keep enemies close and had moved the lockup to the basement. Collins tried a different tack, "Perhaps that king

wanted to keep the more violent criminals as far as possible from his home and family."

Ialin's nostrils flared, and the corners of his mouth bent slightly upward. He did not seem disappointed with the direction of Collins' questioning. Yet.

Prinivere provided some assistance without giving Collins the answer. Perhaps she sensed the blow that might cause to his self-esteem. *\*And the most violent prisoners would be...\**

*meat eaters?* Collins guessed, then cringed at the understanding that answer brought. "It's the lockup for the *Randoms* who take the form of obligate carnivores?"

He cursed himself for answering too quickly. "No, that's not right. King Terrin has them executed."

"King Terrin," Falima said, "and several kings before him. But long ago, rulers tried imprisoning them." She glanced at Ialin, as if willing him to go easier on Collins. "Without much success."

Collins remembered something the current king had told him. "I did know that. The king said most of the carnivores preferred execution." He narrowed his eyes. "But locking them up occurred generations ago. Even if they got to live out their natural lives in prison, wouldn't they all be long dead by now?"

Ialin shifted from foot to foot. "Unless they bred."

Prinivere added the finishing touch. *\*A long-ago king who didn't believe in executions had an "inescapable" catacomb engineered to house the most recidivist and wicked criminals. After one trickster still got out, he hired dragons to ring it with magic. Some of his successors continued to use it. After the Curse, the wards operated mainly to prevent switchers from entering or, more importantly, leaving and to imprison cannibals.\**

After nearly getting hanged for ignorantly eating a rabbit, Collins preferred the term "carnivore." It all made sense now. Likely, the earlier criminals were all male, and the king had expected them to destroy one another or starve. At best, they would die of old age without bothering the honest citizens of Barakhai. Once the worst crime became uncontrollable cannibalism while in animal form, the proportion of men to women would presumably become equal. Thirteen-year-olds not yet used to their new forms would find themselves ripped from loving, protective families and thrust into a lawless world filled with uncivilized people and man-eating carnivores, never to see their loved ones again. He shivered at the implications. The wild animals would instinctively produce more of their own. Rape seemed inevitable, and some would deliberately pair off in human form, creating *Random* offspring that might find themselves the only rabbits or zebras in a den of lions, tigers, and wolves. No telling what kind of horrors might lurk in such a hellhole.

Then, the realization hit home. Suddenly Collins found his eyes so widely rounded they hurt. "I'm supposed to go... I mean, you expect me to face that... alone?" Suddenly, sneaking into a castle and rescuing a caged rat from dozens of guards did not seem so hard.

Eyes still enormous, Benton Collins glanced around the room, scarcely daring to believe his companions could even consider such a task possible. Each looked back at him with such desperate hope that it tugged at his heart. *Maybe if I had an army, a couple of bazookas, and a whole fleet of war-planes.* He shook his head in dumbfounded disbelief. "I want to help. I'll do everything I can. But... I just don't think..." He continued to glance around at his companions, who remained stoically silent. "... it's possible to..." The tears puddled in Falima's eyes again, and it cut Collins to the heart. "But I will help with Zylas."

They did not need Collins for that mission.

"But I'm not sure you'd want me. I don't have any experience. I might mess up again, and—"

Prinivere spoke first, with a mental communication that did not disrupt the uncomfortably heavy silence of his companions. *\*I could send you home and bring you back for... those things you think*



*you need.\**

Collins sighed, not wanting to explain modern weaponry, even to one as intelligent and intuitive as Prinivere. "Armies, bazookas, warplanes. I don't actually have access to those things, although..." He could barely believe he was considering this. "... I could probably scrounge up a gun." *Get around the three-day waiting period in the wake of September 11th? Fat chance.* Unlike the renegades, he had no sources for illegal goods. *Wait, isn't it just handguns that require a permit?* Having never purchased such a thing before, he had no idea of the details. He had gone target shooting with his friends a few times but had always borrowed one of their rifles. No one in his family that he knew of had ever owned a gun of any kind. "I suppose I could look into it." It was a flimsy dodge at best. A single shot was unlikely to stop a charging lion, and anything could get him while he reloaded. He did not even know if he would find the dragons tame enough to follow him once, or if, he found them. "How about if we save Zylas first, then worry about how to get the dragons from the catacombs?"

Each of the renegades nodded and, for the moment, Collins found himself free of an impossible burden. It was a temporary reprieve at best.

And Collins knew it.

## Chapter 7

PRINIVERE lumbered forward, revealing a shadowy cavern containing several sacks as well as Benton Collins' overstuffed and battered backpack. Korfius trotted over to sniff at the contents, but Collins got there first. He could scarcely wait to paw through his things again. First, he wanted his watch. Then he would look for anything else he had brought to this backward world that might aid in rescuing Zylas. He could no longer recall every tiling he had packed.

Collins jerked out the rolled up T-shirts first. Uncomfortable in the wet, grimy clothing he had worn through the swamp, he tugged off his shirt without worrying about propriety, more concerned about not smearing slime across his torso. He pulled on a clean, black pocket tee and his only other pair of jeans. He added a pair of dry socks. Though he needed a bath, he felt much more comfortable in clothing steeped in the familiar essence of Era Ultra. He still worried that the perfumy aroma of deodorant might give him away, but he could not resist brushing his teeth.

Around Collins, his companions plotted with a solemn thoroughness that revealed their desperation. He missed much of the conversation; Prinivere did not always generalize her sendings, and Vernon could communicate only with her. From what Collins could gather as he sorted through his possessions, Ialin planned to impersonate a particular merchant with a macaw switch-form. Aisa would play his wife. They would have to disguise Falima as a mule, since all Barakhain horses worked only as guards for established governmental entities. Vernon would remain a mouse until Zylas' return to man form and could hide in any pocket or crevice.

Collins found his watch buried with his keys and beeper under his clothing. He flipped it around to look at the face. To his surprise, it read almost 5:00 a.m. He had not realized how much time he had spent traveling back and forth from the castle to Prinivere's various hiding places, and he now understood why even his frantic excitement floundered through hovering exhaustion. He strapped the watch to his wrist. Falima, he knew, would switch next, which explained why she was the only one the renegades planned to disguise in a form different than the one she currently held. It also meant they had to wait until

6:00 a.m. just to start working on her. That still left them a solid five hours to free Zylas, but any delay seemed intolerable.

Collins separated out a handful of Turns and Tylenol. Concern for Zylas kept him wide awake despite the wee morning hours. The constant state of alert stress had not yet touched off a headache or a boil of stomach acid, but he wouldn't be surprised if it did soon. He could feel the early prickles of beard on his face, but it was not yet enough to bother with shaving. He put the matches in his pocket. He could not think of a use for the mini tape recorder and fold-up binoculars, but he believed the jerky, Snickers bars, and dog biscuits might prove useful when he faced off with Barakhai's carnivores. *When?* Collins groaned at the realization. He had already started planning for something he had just dismissed as impossible. His friends would talk him into doing it, he felt sure; and Prinivere's attempts to remain neutral, to leave the decision wholly to his conscience, would only make him more certain to agree. He wondered how this group of Otherworld creatures had come to know him better than he knew himself.

Believing Prinivere entirely ensconced in three other minds, Collins did not expect an answer; but he got one. *\*Because you're an easy read, Ben. A good man with a good heart.\**

Warmed by the compliment, Collins flushed, biscuits clutched in his fist. "I—I didn't know you were listening in on me."

*\*I have to. Once again, you're our only hope.\**

*to free the dragons*, Collins finished, turning his gaze, as well as his attention, to Prinivere.

*\*Yes.\** As if feeling his eyes upon her, Prinivere lurched around to face Collins. *\*But also to rescue Zylas.\**

Collins nodded, then realized he did not understand. So far, the plan Ialin and the others had outlined left no place for him.

*\*The king will be expecting us to attempt a rescue.\**

Collins' mouth set in a grim line, and he passed the dog biscuits from hand to hand. He wondered why he had not seen it before. King Terrin could have executed Zylas immediately or tortured him for information. Instead, he had given the renegades a limited amount of time to come to his aid. There could be only one logical reason for such a strategy. *King Terrin knows we'll come and even when, within the space of half a day. He wants to catch more renegades, ones who'll be easier to intimidate and question than Zylas.*

Collins had no experience with reading dragon expressions, and that unnerved him. When she gave no reply, he continued thinking his part of the silent conversation to her.

*We can't let anyone go.*

*\*What choice do we have, Benton Collins?\**

*We* Collins started and stopped. *We could...* He shook his head to clear it and only realized Korfius had approached when one of the biscuits jerked in his hand. He watched the dog gently ease it free of his grip. There was no prudent way to finish the sentence. They could either attempt a rescue or leave Zylas to die. Suggesting they could risk lesser figures in the movement seemed judgmental and cowardly at the same time. *What do we do?*

*\*We,\** Prinivere measured the word so that it referred only to herself and Collins. *\*We free the young dragons.\**

*After—*

Prinivere's raised claw stayed him. *\*Once the dragons are with me, we can use magic to save Zylas and anyone else captured in the meantime. If their rescue attempt fails\*we'll still have you.\**

Collins barely felt Korfius tug the second biscuit from his hands. His mind went utterly blank.

Prinivere did not press. In the background, Collins could hear the discussion growing more heated. Switch times and switch-forms did not match, and they debated the pros and cons of representing themselves as a new group rather than trying to pass for a known entity.

Finally, Collins managed to think, *I'm the ace in the hole?* He rolled his eyes. *God help this mission*

*\*You can do it,\** Prinivere's faith came across as unwavering, to Collins' chagrin. It seemed far more likely that all of them would die.

Prinivere sent Collins nothing more, and the gaps in the other conversation told him she had turned her attention back to them. As promised, she left the decision to him, though she had burdened him with understanding. He would rather have remained ignorant. He wished he had something more than raw guesses to bet on, some knowledge of the future that could guide him to the course most likely to bring all of them out alive. Prinivere had a definite point. At some point, Collins would have to make the decision about whether or not to enter the lair of the carnivores. Serial plans depended on the success of the first one, while simultaneous ones did not. Rescuing Zylas did not require Collins, since no one had to enter the royal chambers. Freeing the dragons depended entirely on him.

*If they don't get to Zylas in time, if Falima gets hurt or killed, I'll blame myself forever for not going with them.* Collins bit his lip at the thought of his friends dying because of his decision. Frantic worry assailed him, making concentration even more difficult. It astounded him how swiftly these people had become his closest companions, how Barakhai had become every bit as real as the world he had once considered unique in the universe. *But if I'm the reason the plan fails, I'll suffer worse.* He looked at the objects around him. None of them could help with freeing Zylas. If he still had Ms multitool, he might feel otherwise; but that had vanished at the castle.

His fear of death receded beneath the horror of living with the knowledge that he had let his friends die rather than assist them. Collins knew he could not leave until he saw as many as possible to safety. "Prinivere?" he called.

The dragon swung her enormous head back to him. Huge, emerald cat's eyes steadied, gleaming with anxiety but demanding nothing.

"When you said 'we' would free the dragons, you meant—?" Collins had no words to finish the question disguised as casual statement.

As always, Prinivere went straight to the heart. *\*I'm a switcher. I can't directly accompany you. But—\**

The last words seemed to hover tangibly in the air.

Collins waited, scarcely daring to breathe.

*\*I can stand at the entrance. My roar—\**

This time, Prinivere did not have to finish. "Scares everyone. It should scare the carnivores away, and—" This time, Collins broke off. Though strong and terrifying, her roar did not carry far. "Couldn't you turn me into something... mean? Something even a carnivore wouldn't mess with?"

*\*Like a dragon?\**

Collins' desperate idea had not gotten that specific, but he felt a small glimmer of hope. "That would do."

Prinivere's eyes gleamed, and the edges of her enormous mouth twitched. *\*If I could do that, the Curse would no longer matter. I could just zap everyone into whatever shape he preferred.\**

Collins was thinking more along the lines of an illusion.

Prinivere did not wait for him to form the words. *\*I'm limited to human faces. I could make you unusually ugly...\**

"Not necessary." Collins saw no purpose to that. With his luck, an illusion like the one she described would remain stuck in place forever. He looked at his scattered belongings, gaze skipping from clothes, to toiletries to the bits of technology. "I've got it!" He snatched up the tape recorder.

Prinivere's head cocked sideways, like a dog trying to make sense of lilting English. She verbalized the details his thoughts supplied her. *\*It's like that thing you called a photograph. Only sound.\**

Collins had never thought of it that way. He scrambled to a crouch. "Right. It captures a sound and allows me to replay it. A few roars into this should keep me safe for a while, as long as I can rewind." Now that he knew he would not have to change into period clothes, he stuffed the jerky and several biscuits into his front jeans pockets. He put the candy bars into his shirt pocket and crammed the fold-up binoculars into the back pockets of his pants. Looping the recorder strap through his belt, he pushed the machine into its own strap, affixing it. "I'm ready."

Prinivere snorted out a noise that sounded like laughter. Every head swayed toward her, and all conversation ceased. Clearly, she did not do that often.

Collins flushed at the attention. He had gone from abject refusal to leaping almost blindly into the task in moments, without much external convincing. He had spent some time in consideration, but the thing that had finally pushed him over the edge was the realization that he had the ability to come up with solutions for a problem that had once seemed insurmountable.

Prinivere detailed her own timetable. *\*I'll need to use the illusion magic on Ialin to get him to pass for the merchant. Aisa's fine as she is, and I don't have any spells to turn a horse into a mule.\**

Ialin nodded grimly, tucking a small hand into his filthy, well-worn tunic. "We'll handle that. But I might need some help whipping up a cart and wares, and I'll need some richer clothes." He glanced at Prinivere. "Vernon?"

Prinivere remained silent for several moments as she sorted out a conversation with a mouse who had reasonable, but imperfect, overlap.

While he waited, Collins swiped the deodorant across his armpits and sorted the Tylenol and Turns, half of each into the two bottles. One he returned to the pack, and the other he forced into the biscuit pocket. By the time he finished, he was no longer anticipating Prinivere's reply, so her sudden presence in his mind startled him.

*\*Vernon always has clothes, but he's having trouble grasping the concept of what a merchant might wear. We can fake product. I have a few spells that could help there...\**

Ialin's and Prinivere's conversation turned private, leaving Collins alone with his thoughts. Too much consideration would lose the current surge of motivation. The conditions the dragon had described in the caverns could lead to any number of possibilities, from a dangerously lawless society to one that had consumed itself in a matter of a few scant years. As a scientist, he had learned to examine all the possibilities. In Barakhai, he worried that approach might paralyze him into total inactivity. At least, he could count on Prinivere's spell from his last visit to help him master any language they might have constructed during the centuries of isolation. Collins would have the technological advantage; he doubted any king would have provided deadly prisoners with anything they could learn to use as weapons.

Collins did think of more items he might find useful. He emptied his pockets back into his backpack, atop the spare clothing and toiletries. The Snickers had softened from his body heat, and was malleable in his grip. He chose his pocketed items more carefully: the pack of matches in his T-shirt, the tape

recorder still looped onto his belt, the beef jerky and a few dog biscuits at his hips.

"Nervous?" Aisa squawked suddenly.

Collins jumped, nearly braining himself on an overhang. He studied the parrot, who returned the favor, head cocked. She balanced on a prominence, two toes on each scaly foot stretching forward and two backward. Speckles of dirt and parrot dandruff stippled her otherwise brilliant plumage. "Apparently," he finally managed with a smile.

"I would be, too," Aisa admitted. She straightened her head. "You should probably take some torches." She hunkered down, measuring distances before launching herself from the stone. Once in the air, she went from clunky to graceful, gliding effortlessly around the craggy interior to land on a box near where Collins had found his pack. "In here."

"Thanks." Collins dropped his pack and headed toward her.

Korfius looked up from where he lay, straight-legged and sideways, on the ground. His tail whacked the dirt, but he did not bother to rise.

Collins hefted the lid of the trunk to reveal a stack of wood wrapped at one end in oily rags. He took a half dozen, adding them to the load in his pack.

Aisa settled on the lip of the open lid. "You're up to this task?"

Collins did not know how to answer. "I hope so."

"Zylas depends on us. On you."

Collins wondered why the parrot/woman felt a need for this awkward conversation. "I've already said I'd do it. You don't have to convince me."

Aisa shifted from one bird foot to the other. "I know."

An uncomfortable silence ensued, and Collins suddenly wished he had not sounded so accusatory. The last time he had come to Barakhai, the renegades had brought him here by subterfuge and won his allegiance with half-truths. He wished they would stop trying so hard to ascertain that he made all his own decisions, free from coercion. All choices involved at least a little duress, and he was not at all sure that, if his mission failed, he wanted full responsibility for his own death. Or worse, for Zylas'.

Aisa broke the hush. "I just want to make sure you don't commit yourself to something dangerous in ignorance."

"In this case, a certain amount of ignorance is unavoidable." Collins strapped up his pack and hefted it, testing its weight. He had to balance bringing anything he might find a use for against making a burden that might slow him in a life-or-death run for safety. He realized he could always drop it should speed become the determining factor. *Can't outrun most predators anyway.* He looked at Aisa again, still gripping the lid with first one claw, then the other. It suddenly occurred to him that she was not talking to reassure him, but herself. She had a dangerous mission ahead of her as well. "But I'm definitely going forward with it. If you, Ialin, and Falima can't rescue Zylas, I will."

Where Aisa's enormous black beak met the wrinkly white skin, it pulled taut, a birdie smile that compressed the fine, tiny feathers that formed the black stripes around her eyes. "I'm new to the special operations team."

Despite his own concerns, Collins had to suppress a grin. Those words sounded hilarious from the mouth of a parrot, even though he knew she had surely chosen others. The translation spell did a remarkable job with slang and jargon.

Aisa did not seem to notice Collins' lapse. "I didn't expect to get thrown into something so big so quickly. Our spies are good, but they can't know everything, everyone. Plans go awry; sometimes

informants get caught. There are gaps... " She shook her head, dislodging a feather. "I don't know if I can fake through those well enough, especially in bird form. More nervous, worse overlap."

Collins could hear the difference discomfort made in her speech even as she explained it. Some of his fellow graduate students deliberately procrastinated before a major project, claiming they performed better under pressure. Clearly, stress had the opposite effect on Aisa. He tried to put her at ease. "From what I've seen so far, you're smart and capable. Don't lose your head, and you'll do fine." He could scarcely believe he found himself in the position of senior operative. Scrawny and bookish, he had never harbored any illusions about becoming a James Bond or a Walker, Texas Ranger. With his straight B average, he was not even destined to become one of those genius scientists the evildoers kidnapped to force them to help with some nefarious plot. He stroked her just behind the nostrils. "If I can do this, you can, too."

Aisa closed her eyes, clearly enjoying the touch as much as the pep talk.

Falima approached at that moment, and Collins watched her every fluid movement. There was nothing delicate about this woman, from her broad face to her chunkily muscled limbs, yet she still managed to carry herself with remarkable grace. She paced deliberately, yet every step seemed light and buoyant. Though built more for function than appearance, her unadorned dress swirled around well-proportioned curves. She would fill a size ten better than a model's two, but she needed that extra space for voluptuous breasts and sculpted hips that made her waist disappear. In his world, her naturally golden skin might make sun worshipers jealous or some doctor worry over jaundice. He loved the shape of her face, the imperfect set of her features, and the long hair, as black as ebony.

As Collins' fingers stilled on her face, Aisa opened her eyes. Without a word, she spread her wings and glided back to Ialin and Prinivere.

"I just came to say... " Falima lowered her head and kicked at a stone on the ground. "I mean we may not..." She looked to Collins to finish her point, but he could not. He truly did not know what she was trying to say.

Falima heaved a heavy sigh, then finally met Collins' gaze. Her eyes looked as untouched and beautiful as a blue-tiled pool before the swimming season, but depthless and bright. The black forelock that fell around them made an exotically stunning contrast. She was to Collins the loveliest creature on any world, and he realized without a hint of doubt that he loved her. "We're both going on... very difficult missions... and..."

Collins placed a hand on her shoulder and felt a sharp thrill of desire. It was not the first time his young body had responded to such casual contact with a woman, but it felt more honest, more innocent and real. "We're both going to succeed."

Falima did not seem as certain. "Just in case. I wanted to say—"

"Don't say 'good-bye.'" It sounded corny, and Collins tried to remember from what movie the line came. He could not even recall what the hero had told his girl to say instead, "farewell," perhaps. "We'll see each other again."

Collins' optimism was not contagious. Though Falima did not directly contradict him, her expression remained pained and uncertain. She passed the stone between her feet, and Collins found himself idly thinking that she would make a good soccer player.

Collins placed his other hand on her other shoulder. "Falima, both of these missions have to succeed, or it's all over. Our cause is just."

Falima pursed her lips, then spoke slowly. "If need and good and justice alone were enough, nothing bad would ever happen."

"This time," Collins said, "those things will prevail. You have to believe that." She did not have to, and

he was not even certain that he did. But going into danger with the right attitude could spell the difference between triumph and failure. "Falima," he started, not sure where he intended to go until the words slipped from his mouth. "I love you."

Falima finally managed a weak smile. "I know."

It was not the answer Collins wanted. "Oh."

"And I love you, too."

Collins appreciated the addition, but suspected she had not finished. "Like a brother?" he suggested.

Falima stared, those bluer than blue eyes growing wide.

"You *do* have some strange customs in your world. In Barakhai, it's considered anathema to court one's own children, parents, or siblings."

Collins grinned, too gripped with joy to care about the misunderstanding. *She loves me. She really loves me.* His hands slid around her back, and he winched her into a tight embrace. She raised her worried face to his, and their lips met in an uncertain kiss that warmed to passion. It all seemed so dreadfully ironic. He would undertake this mission for her and her cause, yet it might well separate them for eternity. The fact that she could only come to his world as a horse, that even here she spent half her life as an animal, seemed trivial compared to the tasks that awaited them both. They would have to see what changes success brought to figure out how, or even if, they could remain together.

Falima broke the embrace. "You'd best let go if you don't want to find yourself hugging a horse."

"Not such a bad thing." Collins enjoyed the sweet musk of her equine aroma, mingled with plant smells and loam. "I happen to know you like scratches behind the ears."

Falima shook back her hair. "Well, yes, but it's best I change outside. I don't want to step on anything. Would you please gather my clothes when I'm done."

Collins nodded, watching her walk to the cave mouth. He knew from experience that switching happened quickly and painlessly, nothing like the old werewolf movies where a creepy half-human thing writhed and howled with madness. In fact, when he arrived at the cave mouth, he found the horse silhouetted against the sunrise, her clothing in a heap near her hooves.

Collins wadded up Falima's clothes, clutching them to his abdomen. They smelled like her, a mixture of her natural body scents, damp, and dried grasses. It tickled his nose, a pleasure he had never noticed in the scoured, perfumed, disinfected, and deodorized world of the early twenty-first century. He had read about pheromones in animals and the studies that suggested people responded to them as well. Reveling in his girlfriend's dirty laundry, he had to admit they were probably right.

*\*Are you ready?\** Prinivere's sudden presence startled Collins from thoughts that turned his ears scarlet. He had forgotten that she could read minds.

*Ready?* Collins squeaked in his mind. *Ready for what?* He shook his head to clear it. "Ready to record your roar, my lady." He patted the mini tape recorder at his belt, thoughts still lost in the cloud of his exchange with Falima.

Min headed outside, presumably to work on Falima's disguise. His own features had changed dramatically, but Collins did not have a chance to study them in the moments it took the little man to flit past. Aisa sailed out behind him.

*\*I wondered when you two were finally going to get together.\**

The flush spread from Collins' hot ears across his cheeks. "How long have you known?" He forced himself to look at the dragon, into eyes like green flame.

*\*I've lived long enough to see some things coming before they happen.\**

Collins continued to stare into those fire and moonlight eyes. "That's a nonanswer."

*\*Perhaps,\** Prinivere said. *\*But the answer doesn't come down to one moment in time. I've seen the early signs and wondered if they might, come together.\** She lowered her head, and her lips pulled back from wicked-looking teeth. *\*I'm glad they did.\**

Collins resented that he might have had more time with Falima before circumstances separated them, possibly forever. "Why didn't you say something?"

*\*Because my saying something might have changed what happened, even how you felt. You might have seen it as my way of keeping you here, and you would never have faced your true feelings. And it makes no sense to encourage something that might not have a chance. You're not just from different backgrounds, you're from different worlds.\**

Collins had to agree. *\*Half the time, from different species.\**

Prinivere's shoulders heaved slightly. She had made her point. *\*So—are you ready?\**

Though uncertain, Collins nodded and checked the buttons. The first time he came into Prinivere's presence, the urge to flee seized him. He wondered if hearing her roar might send him scurrying from the cave.

Prinivere answered with an unsettling suggestion. *\*You might want to cover your ears.\**

Trusting Prinivere to warn the others, Collins pressed the record and play buttons, then plastered his hands over his ears. The roar shattered through his defenses, chilling him to the marrow, and he fought the scream building in his own throat. Terror, not reason, rooted him in place. If it hadn't, nothing short of a harness could have kept him from running.

As the echoes of the sound died away, Collins could hear Falima whinnying wildly in the distance. Heart slamming, rationality returning in a slow trickle, he hit the stop button. "Is Falima... all right?"

*\*Fine.\** Prinivere did not elaborate. *\*Are you?\**

Collins did not answer, not only because he wasn't sure, but because Prinivere could read his state of mind better than he could.

*\*Do you want another?\**

*No!* Collins forced himself to say, "Yes, please." He had originally planned to try to nil the tape, not knowing how much effort he could expend rewinding and replaying. With less than six hours to work and the unpleasantness of Prinivere's first vocalization, he would settle for two. He pressed the buttons and thought hard, *Go!* Almost in afterthought, he clamped both palms over his ears. This time, he prepared his mind as well, thinking in a cycle, it's just *Prinivere. She won't hurt me. It's just...*

The second roar exploded through his mind, scattering his thoughts and stiffening every muscle. He bit his lip, grabbing for the stabilizing anchor of his chant. *It's just Prinivere.* The discomfort lessened gradually. This time, when Collins uncovered his ears, he came immediately back to himself. He hit the stop button.

*\*Let's hear,\** Prinivere suggested.

Collins guessed she spoke from curiosity. She wanted to see for herself how the technology worked. He needed to test the recording, to make certain it had not failed and that it displayed the necessary clarity to keep the carnivores at bay. "All right," he said cautiously, pressing the rewind button. The tape hissed for a moment, then the button clicked up. "But please be ready to stop me if I charge off into the ozone." Collins pushed in "play." A half-second of silence was broken by a full-throated roar that could put a chorus of lions to shame. Collins' heart skipped a beat, and he tensed every muscle, but he did not have to fight instinct to remain in place. He thumbed down the volume just as the second roar exploded



through the speaker.

*\*Amazing!\**

"Yes," Collins agreed.

Prinivere dipped her head. *\*Is that what I sound like?\**

Collins smiled. *Some things are the same everywhere.* It was the first question nearly everyone in his own world asked after hearing a recording of his or her voice. "Yup." He realized he was not being entirely forthright. "Well, I didn't get the full effect of the real thing, since I covered my ears. It seems the same, and everything I've ever recorded comes out exactly like the original." He frowned. "Your recorded roar, even without my hands covering my ears, doesn't scare me as much as the real thing. I'm not sure if that's because I'm getting used to it or if it's just scarier coming directly from a dragon's mouth."

*\*The carnivores won't know I'm not standing right there.\**

Collins nodded. They would have no knowledge of whatever technology had come to Barakhai since their imprisonment, let alone the much more advanced level of his own world.

Prinivere lumbered toward Collins and the cave exit. *\*Iain has a couple of things for you. Then I think we should head out\**

Collins turned as the dragon walked past him, noting the ancient parchmentlike skin, the swampy gray-green of her scales, the myriad scars. Even the triangular plates that ridged her back looked tired, some flopped over at the tips like the ears of a scraggly mutt. He wondered how closely related her DNA might be to the dinosaurs'.

Korfius trotted happily after her.

The dog could not come with him, Collins knew, given the prison wards against switchers. Korfius could not join the other team either since all dogs were guards.

Prinivere gave Collins the answer to the question he was on the verge of asking. *\*I'll bring Korfius with us to the caverns. He won't be able to follow you in, so I'll take him back with me. I'll keep him safe until you return.\**

"Thanks." Though Collins appreciated the economy of speech Prinivere's mind reading allowed, it still bothered him. He imagined he now knew how a stutterer must feel when a well-meaning but impatient acquaintance insisted on finishing his sentences for him. Collins wished he had some way to ensure a modicum of privacy.

*\*I can stop it, if it makes you feel uncomfortable.\**

Prinivere's pronouncement caught Collins by surprise as he followed her from the cave. "You can stop reading minds?"

*\*Well, no. But I can stop responding to thoughts until you've spoken them aloud.\**

Collins considered, then shook his head. "Actually, I prefer things as they are." Without the occasional reminder, he tended to forget about Prinivere's skill until he had already become focused on something embarrassing. The ability went so far beyond the logic of his own world that he found it almost impossible to continually bear in mind. Even as the thought came to him, he knew he had just informed Prinivere of his reasons as well. *And again.* He laughed at the hopeless cycle. He had discovered a few things about her skill. She could read only surface ideas and emotions, and she could only focus on one or two at a time, especially when engaged in conversation. The more the views were steeped in duplicity, the harder she found it to interpret them. Capturing others' thoughts and feelings had often seemed as much a curse as a skill in science fiction novels and movies, yet Prinivere seemed to handle it deftly enough. Of course,

she had had thousands of years to adapt, and it did come naturally to her species.

Prinivere let Collins know she still followed his train of thought. *\*It's as natural as breathing to a dragon. Learning to deal with spending part of my life as a human was much more difficult to handle.\**

Collins believed that but did not dwell on the image. He headed toward Ialin who worked over an edgy, whickering Falima with bursts of quick movement.

Ialin gave Collins only a glance. In that instant, he could see the coarser, older features Prinivere had given Ialin. His dark brown eyes had turned hazel, and the shaggy mop of short, brown hair now fell around a bulbous nose and broad cheeks that looked beefy on his slender frame. "Are you done scaring the crap out of Falima?"

Collins approached the horse with slow gliding movements intended to soothe her. Her eyes rolled backward, and her ears lay pressed against the back of her head. The ground below her was pocked with the scars her prancing hooves had left. "Easy, girl. Good girl." He reached out a hand.

Falima jerked back her nose and rose into a half-rear, whinnying shrilly.

"Easy, girl." Collins held his ground, hand still extended.

Falima nuzzled Collins' fingers. Encouraged, he ran a gentle hand across her muzzle, then scratched behind her ears. His fingers glided over a furry lump, and Vernon scuttled into Falima's mane with an indignant squeak.

"Sorry," Collins murmured, keeping the apology to Vernon at the same volume and timbre as his words to Falima. He continued to look at the horse as he spoke.

Falima calmed, nuzzling his shirt.

Collins looked at Ialin, who watched the exchange, shifting from foot to foot. "Will that do?"

"Nicely," Ialin said gruffly, holding out a sword to Collins. "I have to admit, you have a way with her that I don't."

Collins resisted talking about his new relationship with the human form of Falima. "It's all a matter of slow, unthreatening movement. Predators and other dangers come swiftly and suddenly."

"Predators?" Ialin snorted. "What fear would any horse of Barakhai have of predators?"

Prinivere came to Collins' aid, to his relief and surprise. On his last visit, Ialin had freely baited him, and Falima had often joined in against him. *\*Remember, animals and humans were not always one here. Instinct ingrains deeply and often doesn't dislodge even long after it's no longer needed.\**

Collins nodded his agreement, then added, "Plus, all horses, including Falima, are trained as guards. It's usually best to approach them slowly and unthreateningly as well."

Ialin grunted, the closest he would come to agreeing with Collins. His fidgeting continued. "If you haven't noticed, I don't do slow and steady well. I'm more of a quick and busy mover."

It was gross understatement. If Collins had not known Ialin turned into a hummingbird, he would have had no trouble guessing it. Not all of Barakhai's inhabitants proved so easy to read, however. Collins would never have believed Vernon's enormous, dark-skinned human form could possibly compress down to a tiny gray mouse. In fact, many Barakhains did not share so much as hair or eye color with their switch-forms, and bearing little resemblance to the animal they became was one way of assessing attractiveness. Falima believed herself homely because her golden skin and black hair matched the buckskin coloring of her horse form and her well-muscled human limbs seemed "horsey."

Ialin tapped the sheathed blade against Collins' arm. "Are you going to take this?"

Collins looked at the sword. Cloth blackened by dirt and age hung from the cracked wooden sheath, and only a spiral of bright metal showed where rope or string had once wrapped the grip.

Guessing at the reason for Collins' hesitation, Ialin said, "I have another. It's not the only one."

Nodding, Collins took the sword, and Ialin pulled a short knife from his belt.

"Take this, too."

Believing he might have more use for that, Collins shifted the sword from both hands to one. He wrapped his fingers around a hilt that had absorbed the morning chill and felt like ice in his grip. Gingerly, he took the knife in his other hand.

Prinivere lowered herself fully to the ground. *\*Hop aboard.\**

After several unsuccessful attempts to place the sword comfortably and securely through his belt, Collins secured it through his pack instead. The knife worked better against his hip, though it had no sheath and he was more afraid of accidentally stabbing himself than someone else.

"Thank you." He headed for Prinivere. "Good luck, Ialin. Good luck, Aisa."

"Good luck," they called back.

Collins swung onto Prinivere's back, and Korfius scrambled up beside him. The reality of the task set in at that moment. *I'm actually doing this.* The coolness of the knife blade seeped through his jeans. Once again, the world had changed and would never, ever, be the same again.

## Chapter 8

BENTON Collins clung to Prinivere's back as she skimmed over the forests, dodging the open areas that revealed Barakhai's occasional towns and cities. The wind whipped his seal-brown hair into a tangle, and the banking movements sent his already squeamish stomach lurching. Only the realization that it would mortify Zylas kept him from vomiting on the dragon's verdant scales. Trees zipped past in a blur of green and brown, while sun and sky seemed to shift position every time the dragon wove, yawed, or banked. Collins tried closing his eyes and concentrating on his many questions, few of which he was likely to find answers for, but he soon found that seeing and feeling the aerial stunts helped his equilibrium more than feeling them alone did. In clear contrast, Korfius seemed to enjoy the ride with the exuberance of most dogs on car rides. He kept his face turned into the wind, ears plastered inside out, jowls flapping.

Prinivere could not describe the layout of the caverns, given their warding against switchers. She knew a stream flowed through them, providing fresh water for any remaining inhabitants. People occasionally threw foodstuffs, blankets, or other useful items upstream, out of sympathy or from the belief that some ancestor confined there might have spawned them cousins. Even Barakhai's royals were known to order that cadavers be flung into the water when a famine, illness, or a mass execution overwhelmed the vultures, crows, and hyenas who served as Barakhai's gruesome cleanup brigades, the only ones allowed by law to consume meat.

Prinivere did not even know for certain whether or not the little dragons would be capable of reading or projecting thoughts. The ability came to dragons early, but the parents taught and honed it. Without guidance, they might not learn it at all. Conversely, Collins realized, the youngsters might have discovered the strange form of communication by using it to speak to one another. When Collins spoke the thought

aloud, however, Prinivere shook her hoary head.

*\*For a human, twenty years makes an adult but, to us, that's barely toddlerhood.\**

Collins wondered which form would dominate. He knew Korfius aged in "people years," his dog form lagging to correspond with the human stages of maturity.

This time, Prinivere did not wait for Collins to verbalize his question. *\*I got the longevity and maturation rate of a dragon, but I don't know if that came of it being my first form or the longest lived one. As far as I know, everyone else's Ufa spans a normal human lifetime.\**

Collins kneaded his hands in frustration. "So, if you had to guess?"

Prinivere dipped leftward. *\*This is a unique situation; I've got nothing to compare it with.\** Apparently knowing that would not appease Collins, she elaborated. *\*It seems unlikely that their human forms could have reverted back to infancy, but we can't entirely rule that out. As humans, they might stay at the same maturity level until their dragon forms catch up. It's possible their dragon selves might have gained some understanding from at least those first thirteen years before their birth forms became Random.\** She paused, forest unscrolling beneath them. *\*I'm not even sure which to hope for. If the dragon form takes precedence, they'll have a stronger bent toward magic and live far longer, but it may take decades before they gain the maturity to assist in lifting the Curse.\** She did not need to add that those were decades she, as a greatly aged dragon, might not share.

Collins mulled the possibilities as they zipped through a pristine landscape mostly untouched by human progress. He wondered whether their human forms could actually regress. It seemed terribly unlikely given that time, at least, seemed to follow physical laws. Though it would also involve a time glitch, he found it less difficult to believe that their dragon forms might have matured more quickly, making them the equivalent of young teens. Maybe their switch-forms simply aged at different rates, making them twenty or so in their human forms and infantile when dragons, or the forms meshed in some odd manner in-between. Carrie Quinton would, of course, know; and Collins ruefully wished he had asked her. He could not recall her ever mentioning them having a human form. She discussed them like animals, talking about breeding them as if they had no humanity to consider. Now, he could scarcely believe the thought of questioning her about their exact nature had never before entered his mind.

As usual, Prinivere intervened in Collins' thoughts. *\*It didn't seem necessary to know such a thing. And we had other details to worry about.\** She added one more thought that relieved him, *\*And I happen to know you figured you could always turn to us for those sorts of specifics.\**

Prinivere was right, as always, but it did not console Collins very much to realize it. He glanced at Korfius who sat nestled in a hollow between Prinivere's left wing and torso, head up and tongue lolling in the breeze.

Collins turned to more practical concerns. He would not have time to draw more than a crude map in the caverns, even if he had had a pencil and paper with which to do it. Leaving a food trail had obvious disadvantages that went way beyond Hansel and Gretel. He had no rope or string to mark his way back to the entrance. He would have to rely on his memory and as many stones as he could carry into the cave along with his gear, or some other method that came to him in the next few minutes.

One more question occurred to Collins as Prinivere spiraled into a descent among a spattering of low hills covered with a multicolored carpet of wildflowers. "The dragons are switchers, too, right?"

*\*Right,\** Prinivere sent back, concentrating more on her landing than on divining the intention of Collins' question.

Obligingly, Collins continued, "So how did someone get them through the magical harrier and into the caverns in the first place?"

Prinivere landed on rocky ground with a hop and a bounce, then walked a few steps to keep her passengers settled. *\*That's an excellent question, Ben. One I hadn't considered.\**

Collins scrambled from her back, only to be met by Korfius, who had leaped to the ground more swiftly. The dog trotted to his side, tail waving hopefully. Collins stirred his fingers through the dark fur on the top of Korfius' head with his fingertips, surprised by Prinivere's confession. He expected the ancient dragon to know everything and had hoped she had an equally excellent answer.

*\*Clearly, the kings of the past had a way to get prisoners inside, some sort of one-way portal, since no one has ever escaped or entered without the express will of the royals. A crystal, perhaps, imbued with magic. I'd have thought such a thing destroyed, though, when King Terrin's father tried to purge the world of everything magical\**

"Tried." Collins pounced on the operative word. The realization enhanced his understanding of why Zylas had so fiercely guarded his translation stone and Prinivere's life, why the crystal he had rescued meant so much to them. Collins could see why the Barakhain royalty might take special pains to see to the demise of an item that allowed switchers through long-placed magical barriers, since it would also grant commoners access to the rulers' quarters. "Apparently, that one-way portal is another magic item he missed destroying."

*\* Apparently. Things imbued with enough magic protect themselves, and it would not have been used for its proper purpose in at least a hundred years.\** Prinivere stretched her neck to delineate a specific hill. *\*There's a natural entrance to the caverns here.\**

This time, Collins had no difficulty seeing the cave mouth amid a tangle of vines and blue-green clover. Idly, he wondered whether practice had improved his vision or if it had more to do with the diligence with which the renegades camouflaged their hiding places. This cave's cover grew spontaneously, without tweaking from outlaws who could not afford discovery. As Prinivere had mentioned, a stream wound through the hills and into the entrance, a spare trickle that bubbled against its bed of rocks and fallen foliage.

Prinivere dipped her muzzle into the water and drank. Taking her cue, Collins knelt at the bank and dipped his hands into the stream. Icy water as clear as fresh-cleaned glass spilled through his fingers. After decades of warnings about Giardia, amoeba, and other invisible pathogens teeming even in the water of the highest, untouched mountains, Collins had to force himself to drink. It was not his first natural water; he had shared his companions' rations on both trips to Barakhai. Rationally, he knew their stored water came directly from unchlorinated rivers, brooks, and streams like this one, but deceiving himself proved easier when his sustenance came from a man-made vessel.

Collins lowered his mouth to his hands and sipped at the remaining dregs of water. It carried no taste at all, not even of the bracken that raced downstream into the caverns. As a budding scientist, he knew the human eye could not discern even the most lethal pathogens in the world, but he found assurance in the clarity and lack of taste of Barakhai's water. Uncertain when he would get his next chance to drink without having to watch his back, he sucked down several handfuls of water, feeling like a young gazelle at a communal drinking hole. Cheetahs and leopards also knew the scent of water.

*\*Ready?\**

Though pointless and unnecessary, Collins appreciated the question. Prinivere knew exactly how unprepared he felt, how he felt incapable of truly steeling for any mission this important and peppered with so many unknowns. He resisted the urge to say, "Ready as I'll ever be." Prinivere might never have heard the phrase spoken, but his thoughts would betray its triteness. She understood he felt hopelessly ill-equipped and unready, emotionally as well as physically, yet she had already given him all the appropriate pep talks. From the moment he stepped into the cave, Benton Collins was on his own.

*\*Not quite\** Once again, Prinivere read his mind. *\*Don't forget my roar.\**

In the flurry of more recent concerns, Collins had let that slip his mind. He smiled at the reminder. Had Prinivere not mentioned it, he might have got caught running in terror from the sound along with any inhabitants within hearing.

Collins tried one last desperate measure. "Can you keep in touch with me? With your mind-talking thing, I mean?"

Prinivere made a huge movement Collins interpreted as a shrug. *\*I can try. But it's not likely to penetrate the magic. And I can't stay here long either. Like us, the king has many spies, but he pays well for their loyalty. Also, I'm the only one who can bridge the gap between thoughts in human and animal forms. The others may need me, too.\**

Certain he would catch no easy breaks, Collins had anticipated the answer. "I'm ready," he announced.

*\*Cover your ears.\** Prinivere trudged to the cave mouth.

Collins obeyed and cycled the reminder of Prinivere's harmlessness through his mind. This time, the roar barely stiffened him, though it echoed eerily through the caverns.

He loosened his grip and shrugged his backpack onto both shoulders. Though accustomed to stylishly carrying it on one, Collins found practicality and ease more compelling than image here. He marched boldly toward the cave.

*\*Good luck. All our hopes go with you.\**

Collins did not bother with a reply. He scooped up a large sandstone, then stepped into the mouth of the cave. It opened onto a cavern the size of his apartment, dimly lit by sunlight funneling through the opening. Craggy outcroppings shadowed corners that might hide any number of man-eating beasts. Stalactites jutted from the ceiling like pointed teeth, and Collins felt as if he had just stepped into the jaws of the largest carnivore of all.

Korfius barked wildly.

Glad for the excuse, Collins exited the cave. He stepped back into daylight that seemed extraordinarily bright. For inexplicable reasons, he expected to find himself in some new and strange location, utterly alone; but the scene looked exactly as it had mere moments earlier. Prinivere's neck glided toward him, and Korfius jumped up on him, knocking him to the ground and covering him with doggy kisses.

Prinivere remained silent, avoiding the obvious question. No flimsy excuse could work against a mind reader. She knew Collins had faced no clear danger.

Collins extricated himself from the dog and clambered to his feet. The silence bothered him, so he asked the obvious, in reverse, "Why did I do that?" He anticipated something profound from Prinivere, about how only he could answer that, so her actual words surprised him.

*\*You forgot to say 'good-bye' to your dog?\**

Collins liked Prinivere's answer better than the one that came to him: *Because I'm an infernal coward.* He knelt, this time preserving his equilibrium despite the attention from the overeager puppy. He caught the fuzzy face between his hands and squeezed it like a seldom-seen aunt might at a family reunion. "Korfius, I just want you to know I love you. And, no matter what anyone else says, you're the best dog a guy could ever have."

Korfius cocked his head to one side and whined.

Collins hugged the mongrel close, kissing the warm fur of his neck. "Now," he whispered in Korfius' floppy ear, "go with Prinivere."

Korfius whimpered again.

Without further words, Collins headed back into the cave. Again, the dimness swallowed him, and he waited for his eyes to fully adjust. The rocky prominences and concavities of the entryway formed a mad chaos of hiding places, and Collins imagined a deadly man-eater behind every one. Since they became people at intervals, these carnivores would have none of the wariness of humans shown by the wild, gun-hunted creatures of his own world. Seized by the sudden urge to leave one more time, to reassure Korfius and request one last roar from Prinivere, he glanced at his watch. It was after eight o'clock. Shocked, he looked again, staring. He had less than four hours to find the dragons, rescue them, and use them, if possible, to save Zylas. That motivated him. Pausing to scrape a huge "1" on the cave wall with the piece of sandstone still clutched in his fist, he hurried around the walls, seeking breaks.

A third of the way around the cavern, Collins found what he sought. A slitlike hole opened onto darkness. Deciding on his marking strategy, he put another "1" at this exit. If he marked all the doors, he would know where he had been and where each fit in the pattern of his search. It seemed wisest to number by caves rather than openings. That way, he would know if he had returned to a place he had already explored.

Loath to leave the light, Collins looked for other ways out. Unless he marked all of them, he ran the risk of performing double searches or of getting himself lost in familiar territory. Amid the stones and crags, he discovered only one other exit from the cavern, a wider, jagged hole that would admit him far more easily than the other. Collins could fit through either without much effort, but he thought it best to stick with the wider openings, more likely routes for dragons. He tried not to think about the fact that these would also attract larger carnivores of other varieties. Neither opening from this cavern could wholly stop even a creature as large as a tiger, but the slit might compress the big cat's whiskers enough to deter it. Chalking another "1" at the side of the opening, Collins walked into the deeper cavern.

As Collins passed through one crude "room" to the next, his shoe sank into something soft and squishy. Warmth trickled around his shoe, and the explanation wafted to his nose. *Dung*. From the feel of it under his sole, it seemed fresh. The deeply buried hope that the carnivores might have hunted one another to extinction instantly evaporated. Prinivere's roar might have chased them from the front caverns, but he had no idea how long the effect would last or how far they might have run. Fingers shaking, he seized the recorder at his belt and fumbled with the play button. The silence erupted into another roar, a pale shadow of the first one yet terrifying enough. Ahead of Collins, nails scrabbled against stone, clearly retreating.

Collins slid off his pack, then groped through it for a torch just as the second recorded roar broke the stillness. Taking one of the rag-wrapped sticks in hand, he fumbled the matches. Silence descended around him, broken only by the hiss of the recorder, now playing blank tape. He lit the torch, jammed the rest of the matches back into his shirt pocket, and clutched the torch between his knees. Hands free, he stopped the tape and poked the rewind button, realizing its use would slow him down immensely. Frustrated by dwindling time and the irritating reality of the situation, he took the torch back in hand. It cleared the darkness in a ragged circle that left him longing for overhead lamps. It seemed a wonder that every man and woman of Barakhai had not gone blind.

As Collins walked, ears attuned for movement, vision glued to the uneven ground, he realized several things. First, he had no way of knowing whether or not the Barakhains saw clearly. He doubted they had the technology to create functional glasses. He also knew his own equipment had serious, previously unconsidered limitations. He could not remember the last time he had changed the batteries of the tape recorder, and a constant play and rewind cycle would run them down swiftly. The thought became an obsession. He needed to play the roars frequently enough to keep predators at bay yet not so constantly that he ran it out of power, slowed his pace to a frustrating crawl, or allowed the descendants of criminal carnivores to become accustomed to the sound.

Collins shuffled his feet, raising the torch to examine the walls of the second chamber. This one proved smaller, with only a single exit into an oblong cavern that seemed more like a corridor than a cave. He eased inside, then marked it with a "2." The closeness of the walls brought a sensation of tomblike enclosure that sent a shiver through his body. At the same time, he appreciated its narrowness. It left no space for anything to slip past and behind him, and he could easily and simultaneously explore both stone walls with his fingertips.

In this manner, Collins plunged deeper into the ancient caverns, pausing at intervals to play the recording of Prinivere's roar. Occasionally, he thought he heard a scrape or a scabble, a hiss or a whisper bouncing from walls with impossibly complex acoustics. Torch after torch burned to a nub as an hour and a half slipped by without the need for Collins to enter any area twice. He had abandoned several openings in favor of others, six or seven to his count, leaving them marked and wondering if he had mistaken a better choice for a worse one. A few scattered bones littered the stony pathways, and Collins passed these without a second glance. He preferred not to waste time identifying any dead creature. Anything but fish were ultimately human, and none of these were fish. He had enough trouble noticing bones in a fish fillet on a plate six inches from his nose.

Needing a break, Collins sat on a crag to consider his plan, wedging the torch and flopping his backpack down beside him. He had no idea how far the caverns might span, but random wandering was beginning to seem pointless. He considered shouting for the dragons but worried about what else might choose to answer. Even if Quinton had trained them to come when called, she probably used names she had given them. He hoped Prinivere's roar would draw them out, if only from curiosity, yet he realized it might just as likely have the opposite effect. Raised by humans, the young dragons might find the sound as fearsome and terrifying as he did. So far, he had come upon nothing living, only the occasional sound of something unseen scuttling into the darkness.

Knowing time was not on his side, Collins sighed, took the recorder in hand, and hit the rewind button for what seemed like the hundredth time. He started to his feet, twisting to get his backpack.

The movement saved him. Something immense crashed into his shoulder instead of his throat, hurling him onto his stomach. Rocks stabbed his ribs and hip. Air exploded from his lungs. Momentum sent him flying across the cavern floor, rocks tearing and hammering his clothes and flesh. Claws sank into his back, and hot panting burned the back of his neck. Breathless, he found himself incapable of screaming, and agony destroyed all rational thought momentarily. Only one idea managed to wriggle through Collins' shock: *I'm going to die.*

Adrenaline pumped through Collins like acid, driving him to action. He gathered his hands and knees under him, attempting to crawl, but the thing remained with him, clamped to his back. Teeth closed over the rear of his head. Pain screamed through his scalp. He gasped in a series of ratcheting breaths. Warm blood trickled down his neck and spine. He eeled sideways, yawning violently, trying to dislodge a creature that seemed to weigh at least as much as he did. It rocked, keeping its balance with agile ease, though the wild motions did slow its assault. Every movement sent pain stabbing through Collins, but he dared not stop long enough to give the creature an easy shot at something vital.

Collins finally managed a scream, though he still harbored no hope that any creature of Barakhai would instinctively run from humans. He gave an abrupt twist that brought him halfway around and freed his arms for the battle. The teeth jarred loose, tearing away furrows of hair and scalp with a pain that brought tears to Collins' eyes. He flailed at the creature. His right fist struck something solid and furry. Still winched around the recorder, his left caught the creature a smashing blow across a whiskered cheek. The recorder shattered in his fist, pieces skittering through the cavern. The animal tumbled to the ground, and Collins surged to his feet, seeing it for the first time in the dim outer reaches of the lantern's glow. Tawny and cat-shaped, it launched its muscled frame at him again.

*Cougar.* Dizzy and slowed by his wounds, Collins threw himself sideways. Puma, mountain *lion.* The



bulk of the creature crashed against his side, tossing him like flotsam in a gale. He scrambled to regain his footing, desperate to find it before the cougar found him once more. He stumbled backward over a stalagmite, tripped, and fell. The unexpected motion foiled the graceful animal's attack again, and it went sailing over Collins. Shadows danced on the ceiling, and he found himself hemmed in by stone formations. He needed to act swiftly or die, and his mind raced, strangely clear. He had read more than his share of nature stories and preferred animal shows on public television to anything "prime time." He tried to recall any detail about cougars that might help him now.

*Shadows.* Collins glanced wildly around him, trying to locate the animal before it pounced again. *Shadows come from light.* It was not a cougar fact, but any animal would shy from fire. He dove for the source of the shadows, seizing the torch on the move. The cougar bounded after him, catching him a paw blow to the head that sent him skidding across the uneven ground, senses reeling. He let the force take him where it would, clutching the torch like a lifeline. Then, at last, memory surged to the fore. Men had hunted cougars to dangerously low numbers because of one fatal flaw: unlike other large cats, they never stood down dogs. Toy poodles had been known to tree the fiercest, most massive males. Once hunting dogs caught the scent of one of the now rare cats, the outcome was inevitable. Collins only hoped Barakhain cougars suffered from that same instinct.

As the beast flew toward him, Collins held his ground. He thrust the torch into its face, barking madly in his best imitation of Korfius.

With a yelp of pain and surprise, the cougar threw itself sideways, rolling, its fur alight. Turning on its heels, it screeched off into the deeper caverns.

The torch dropped from Collins' suddenly trembling fingers. His head buzzed, making coherent thought all but impossible. He dragged himself toward his backpack, seized it, then hauled it to his chest until it lay balled beneath him. Agony screamed through his whole body so that he found himself incapable of focusing on any one injury. Something pattered steadily to the stone. *Blood*, he realized, but it took another few beats to add, *my blood*. His consciousness swam, and he fought to anchor it with the terrifying knowledge that if he blacked out, he was cougar chow.

*Staunch the bleeding.* Collins did not need medical training to know that no first aid mattered more. Attuned to any sound that might herald the cougar's return, he pulled the tatters of his T-shirt tight across his back and head, knotting it over his chest and brow. The myriad abrasions and cuts over his ribs, abdomen, and limbs hurt but they did not require tending yet. His body could handle them. He tried to stand, instantly pummeled to the ground by vertigo. Still clutching the pack, he inched his way across the floor. Returning to Prinivere seemed the wisest course, though it would lose him all the ground he had attained. She could heal the wounds that hampered his every movement. Yet, Collins realized, he would have to find her first. Backtracking seemed at least as far as pushing onward, and he doubted she still waited for him at the entrance.

Collins lowered his head, driven to move but certain haste would only assure that he lost consciousness and, ultimately, lead to his death. Despair rushed down upon him. He was alive but gravely injured. His task had seemed nearly impossible before, now it had become even more so. But he also knew that the young dragons held the key to rescuing not only Zylas, but now himself as well. He had little choice but to push on and hope for the best.

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## Chapter 9

THE cart lurched toward Opernes Castle, drawn by a buckskin horse now disguised as a tea-brown, dusty mule. In the driver's seat, Ialin forced himself to grip the rope reins securely in both hands and concentrated on not fidgeting. He wore the face of Eshwyn the merchant, but he had known from the start that he could never pull off that deception for long. Aisa perched on his shoulder, and Vernon hid in a deep pocket, both as convinced as Collins that the plan was precisely as it seemed. The mind reading dragon had to know the extra layer Ialin had devised, but she feigned ignorance of his secret with the ease of long practice.

On the far side of the moat, a pair of male guards challenged from the parapets. "State your name and business."

Ialin met the gaze of one with trained steadiness and dutifully imitated the merchant's voice. He willed his body in place, winching his hands to white fists to keep from wringing them. So far, jettisoning his own nervous habits preoccupied him more than any attempt to pass for the other man. "Do not play games with me, Shirith." He continued to stare at the guard to his left. "Wittmore." He indicated the other with a tip of his head. "You know who I am."

Both guards smiled. Shirith spoke first, "Certainly we know you, Eshwyn, but not that rickety wreck you came in."

Ialin snorted, clenching and unclenching the muscles of his backside against the seat. It allowed him to give in to his need for constant movement without revealing it to the guards. "I lent the regular rig to my good-for-nothing brother. I didn't think I'd need it for a spell, but then I got a whole load of *vilegro*. It won't keep, and I wanted to give His Majesty first rights to it. I borrowed who and what I could to get it here." Ialin gestured at the old cart and Falima, who kept her head low in a mulish posture.

Silence followed.

"So," Ialin continued, "I'm irritable, annoyed, and tired. Are you going to let me in, or do I take my business elsewhere?" He had deliberately chosen an excellent product. Not only did the spoilage story work for explaining the mule cart in place of Eshwyn's finer ox-drawn wagon, the guards would anticipate the rare and delicious *gahiri* the castle cook would create from the *vilegro* seed.

"I'll get the drawbridge." Wittmore disappeared.

Ialin lowered his head, but not before he caught a glimpse of several faces peering at him over the parapets. The king had increased his outer wall guards and, probably, his patrols. Ialin hoped that meant shorting the inner defenses. Likely, no guard in human form was off duty, but that only supplied the castle with a few extra hands. No decree of the king could delay, abridge, or change the horse and dog times of his security forces.

Ialin dismounted from the cart as the drawbridge jerked downward, chains clanking and creaking. He caught Falima's halter as she tossed her head with a series of nervous snorts. The braid of rope tore at his callused palm. "Quiet," he reminded. "Be still. You're a mule, not a horse. A mule."

Falima quieted, though her hooves beat a wild, chaotic tattoo against the dirt.

Ialin gritted his teeth. Her behavior would give her away more surely than any noise. Mule vocalizations varied in their similarity to a horse's, but they tended toward a steady calmness that precluded panic. As the plank dropped to the ground in front of Ialin, he made a difficult decision he had considered on the trip. Falima's enormous switch-form turned her into a liability once inside the castle grounds. Aisa thought Falima could blend in with the guard forces, but Ialin had doubts. He preferred not to risk anyone unnecessarily. In her current form, Falima did not have the overlap to protest; and, though he knew he would catch trouble for it later, Ialin planned to take advantage of that weakness.

Ialin unbound Falima from the cart. He removed the various ropes, waving them into her face. "Yay, mule! Get on home with you!"

Startled, Falima reared. When she dropped back down, Ialin hissed into her ear. "Go on, Falima. Go somewhere safe. We'll meet up with you later." Seizing the traces, Ialin hauled the cart onto the drawbridge. Despite the light load, it was more difficult than he expected; he had to hurl all of his meager weight into the task. Not for the first time, he wished he were larger. Constant movement had granted him strength beyond his bulk, but only that of a normal-sized man.

The cart rumbled across the slats, boards squeaking. Aisa squawked and flapped, her wings kicking up a draft that stirred the water and dried the sweat on Ialin's neck. A wing beat slapped him in the face, flopping a greased clump of black hair into his eyes. He paused to brush it back into place. "Easy, Frida." He used the name of Eshwyn's wife to remind Aisa of her role. "Please don't make this any harder."

Aisa ruffled her feathers and hunkered down on Ialin's shoulder.

Once across the moat, Ialin met two more guards at the gate, one a willowy female, the other a compact male. He knew the man's name, Thelfori, but not the woman's. He nodded a greeting to both.

The woman studied him with clear curiosity. "Do you always leave one of your entourage behind?"

Ialin glanced over his shoulder, glad Falima had left his line of vision and not attempted to follow. The last time she had crossed this drawbridge, the hollow ring of her hooves against suspended wood had spooked her. "First time," he admitted. "She has another engagement, and she's just about ready to switch. I only paid her to come this far."

The guard just grunted, helping her companion pull open the heavy, ironbound gates.

Ialin hauled the cart into the gatehouse, trying not to look winded. The doors swung shut behind him, immersing him in darkness. He took the moment to flex every muscle. He felt locked in cramps from head to toe, tired of suppressing the natural and constant motion that kept him alive in hummingbird form. Then, the doors in front of him swung open, placing him back into the bright rush of sunlight and the judgment of a group of guards.

Now, Ialin could not wholly suppress his anxiety, nor did he believe he needed to do so. Even a regular to the court of King Terrin might find an increase in his guard accompaniment intimidating. He glanced around his escort, as if seeking solace in familiar faces. Though not as skilled at reading others' emotions as Zylas, Ialin did manage to pick out one soft-eyed woman who clearly sympathized. He smiled and winked at her, and her grin broadened.

A burly man held out his hands. "Let me take the cart, sir."

Ialin gave over his burden gladly. His companions lay safely on his person, for now. Aisa eyed the gathering, cocking her head this way and that to bring every guard within the scrutiny of at least one steel-blue eye. Vernon stayed still in his pocket, taking his cues from Ialin. For the mouse's sake, he tried to keep his muscles loose, his movements fine and smooth. If the guards examined Ms cargo closely, they would find lesser plants buried beneath a layer of *vilegro*. He hoped it would not come to that. Pawing through a merchant's wares was imprudent at best and potentially dangerous. To do it at the request of the king meant gravely insulting his guest. Without the monarch's consent, a guard risked charges of theft or treason.

The female guard who had returned Ialin's smile worked her way through the group to take his arm. He searched his memory for her name, without success. He smiled warmly and whispered, "Thanks."

"I thought you might prefer a familiar face." The guard steered Ialin toward the castle. "Your usual room, Eshwyn?"

Ialin nodded, knowing precisely which guestroom Eshwyn preferred, on the third floor in the south wing.

"Do you need to gather your personals?"

Ialin could have kicked himself. He should have anticipated that question, too. "We don't plan to stay long. Anything I need, I can send for."

"Very well." She gestured at her closest associates, and they gave Ialin more space. Some peeled away to various tasks, leaving a crew of five to lead him to the inner courtyard.

Ialin avoided speaking as much as possible, devoting the majority of his attention to maintaining his persona and not squirming. He tried to ignore all thoughts of Zylas. Worry already drove him to an extremely risky rescue. He could not afford to betray his intentions by exhibiting concern or need. So far, he appeared to have passed whatever tests the guards had thrown at him. The facade could only hold up so long, however. The renegades' information was as imperfect as the men and women who gathered it, and they could not be present for every miniscule interaction. At some point, he would need to properly recognize a stranger, would overlook an unanticipated fine detail that the real Eshwyn would never miss. Anyone who came to Opernes Castle now, in the hours before Zylas' execution, would have to weather suspicion and undergo intense scrutiny. Ialin wondered how long he could hold out.

They passed through another gatehouse, into the inner courtyard, and headed toward the castle. Unable to wholly suppress the fretfulness that assailed him even in the most familiar circumstances, Ialin turned every movement into something seemingly deliberate: a scratch, a readjustment, a gesture. When he had joined the renegades as a starry-eyed, idealistic youth, he had never expected any plan this crucial to fall squarely on his tiny shoulders. Zylas was the key to so much; without him, the renegades might fall apart without achieving the one goal that mattered: removing the Curse that had haunted Barakhai for centuries. Benton Collins had been right about one thing; they should never have risked Zylas on the previous mission. Like Prinivere, the rat/man should sit in some safe command center, changing quarters with every threat, concern, or whim.

That thought brought a smile to Ialin's lips. He could not imagine anything short of magic keeping Zylas from the rebel movement's front, and it raised a familiar paradox. That which made the albino such a charismatic key figure for their cause also placed him in positions of greatest peril. His many successes had left them all complacent. Luck, not omnipotence, had kept Zylas alive this long. Now, it seemed, he had run out of it.

Realizing he had come back to the very topic he had vowed to avoid, Ialin turned his attention to the castle which was drawing ever closer. His entourage seemed unbothered by his long silence, even the woman who now unlinked her arm from his. Soon, they stood in front of the castle door, and Ialin's escort chatted briefly with the sentries. Those moved aside, and the massive door swung open to reveal the inner regions of Opernes Castle.

Ialin had never entered the massive edifice through the door before and never in human guise. He toed the line between gawking and giving enough of his mind to his surroundings to memorize them while still holding his constant drive to move at bay. He also kept his attention on the guards, watching for evidence of suspicion, anything that might suggest a need to switch to his second plan. He dared not rely on Collins, certain the blundering fool would foul up the rescue, just as he had his last mission, the one that ended in Zylas' capture. True, the Other-worlder had managed to bring them the crystal that enhanced Prinivere's fading magic, but he had nearly died in the process and had made innumerable mistakes along the way. *Including cannibalism.* Ialin still found the crime unforgivable and wondered how his friends managed to work so comfortably with a murderer. Other renegades had killed, when necessary, but they had never struck down innocents. The realization that Collins had slaughtered, butchered, and eaten a sweet elderly woman whose only crime was that she happened to have a rabbit switch-form sent a shudder through Ialin.

"Cold?" the female guard asked as she led Ialin up the spiraling staircase.

Though that was not the case, thanks to his racing metabolism, Ialin had no better explanation for his shivering. "A bit. That draft howling down the stairway bothers me every time I come. You'd think I'd

have gotten used to it by now."

One of the men grumbled, "Never noticed it, myself."

"Really?" said a third, the only other woman. "It creeps into my bones, even when the hearth's going and it's warm air washing over me."

That started a casual discussion that Ialin appreciated, as it allowed him to fall back into silence. Slow plans frustrated him, especially with his switch time approaching.

He would certainly find Zylas downstairs in the dungeon, yet he dared not even look in that direction yet. He allowed the group to usher him upward, past the kitchen/artisan level, past the dining hall/library level, and to the third landing. Ialin naturally turned south; but one of the guards opened the left-hand, northern door and gestured for him to enter the meeting room.

It was not standard procedure. Ialin swallowed his discomfort and forced a tense smile, concentrating on the need to hide his concern. Nothing this day had proceeded in its regular fashion, and that seemed to have more to do with the king's paranoia than any specific suspicions about him.

Ialin stepped around the guards to peek inside the small room, its only furniture a scarred wooden table surrounded by chairs. A colorful tapestry of patternless design filled most of one wall. Another wall supported a narrowing window that overlooked the courtyards, thin enough at its innermost dimension to thwart anything larger than an insect. From experience, Ialin knew he could wriggle through it in switch-form, and that gave him a guilty sense of security. If all else failed, at least he could escape, though it would mean abandoning his companions. A silver flagon of wine and three matching goblets sat on a lace napkin in the middle of the table. Two doors led out of opposite walls: the one he had entered by and another headed deeper into the castle to servant's quarters and more guest rooms.

Ialin froze on the lintel, uncertain and wondering if he faced another test. "Excuse me, but my 'usual quarters' are the other way." He made a motion toward the south door.

The familiar woman took Ialin's arm again and ushered him inside the meeting room with an apologetic look. "The chamberlain will be with you shortly."

The *chamberlain*? Ialin's heart skipped a beat, shaken by the idea of facing a chief officer in the king's household. Assuming she meant Jarvid, the chamberlain who oversaw the visiting merchants, Eshwyn had a close, long-term relationship with him. The renegade agents hidden among the servants managed only spotty information when it came to the specifics of conversations and personal interactions, Ialin would have to play things carefully and mostly by ear. He steeled his resolve, lifting his chin, and guessed at the best response. "Don't I even get a chance to settle in first?"

The woman laughed. "Don't you ever get tired of questioning the inscrutable motives of royals, Eshwyn?"

Ialin appreciated the reminder. It never hurt to remember that the upper echelons of the king's staff, and his family's personal assistants and aides, mostly consisted of trusted aunts, uncles, and cousins. Terrin relied on those few nonswitchers who could enter the rooms on the top two floors for everything from tidying up to strategizing. "I'm just hoping Jarvid gets tired of meeting with rumbled, exhausted, travel-filthy merchants after just this one time."

Ialin knew the actual business of trading and negotiation would occur in the courtroom, in the presence of nobles, litigants, diplomats, and whoever else had come to deal with the kingdom. Few were accorded the honor of meeting directly with any official before the proceedings. Likely, this was to be a friendly conference, only tangentially related to trading; and that realization only heightened Ialin's discomfort. Bartering he understood. He dreaded the thought of exchanging pleasantries with a stranger while feigning an extensive friendship.

The guard loosed another salvo of laughter. "I'll let him know you're here. Anything you want?"

*Prinivere's mind reading would be nice.* "No. Thank you." Eshwyn had a known penchant for gruff, sometimes crude, humor, so Ialin added sarcastically, "Who needs a warm bath or a nap on clean linens when he can sit in rock-hard, ass-pinching chairs?"

The woman raised her brows, but a few of the men smiled this time. They all exited, closing the door behind them.

For the first time, Ialin allowed himself to pace in a swift, short oval, dispelling some of the pent up energy he had held in check for too long. He glanced down at formal pantaloons that hid a carefully manufactured scar on his right ankle. Road dust had settled into the cuffs, further marring silks that already had a tear at the knee. It was the best garb he could find in Vernon's cottage, castoffs from some wealthy baron or merchant who could afford not to bother patching his clothing. Or, perhaps, a servant, tailor, or washerwoman had swiped the garment from a man with enough wealth not to notice one item missing, then donated it to the rebels' cause. It was even possible that someone of means had taken refuge with Vernon, leaving the silks in exchange for something less noticeable so that another could use them in future operations. Vernon had a kind heart that attracted strays and runaways of many stripes. His home had become a sanctuary, scouted by most of the *durithrin*, the wild folk. Fugitives had a way of disappearing once they reached Vernon, but even the constabularies rarely bothered him. They, or a loved one, might one day need his help.

When the door handle creaked, Ialin stiffened, pretending to stare out the window at the brightening sky and its vast array of puffy clouds etched against azure. Then, the door wrenched open to reveal Jarvid flanked by two elite guardsmen. The king's second cousin bore little resemblance to him. Aqua and white satin, tailored for the burly forms of the king and his brother, hung loose on Jarvid's slender frame. Unlike them, he wore no beard over his wide, dimpled chin. His cheekbones perched higher, and his cheeks were chapped and windburned. He had the same keen, brown eyes, however; and their classic wheaten ringlets fell around his ears, held in place with perfumed oil. He gave Ialin a friendly smile and made a gesture of greeting before the door had fully closed.

Ialin bowed, waiting for the other man to speak first. He knew little of the intricacies of court protocol but enough to treat a king's chamberlain with utmost respect. Caught off guard, Aisa squabbled to maintain her position on his shoulder.

"Good morn upon you, Eshwyn."

"Good morn upon you, too, sir," Ialin returned, completing his bow. Aisa grabbed his ear to steady herself. Sharp edges of rock-hard beak ground into sensitive flesh with an agony that made him gasp. For an instant, he thought she had bitten a chunk from his ear. Then she released her hold and the pain dropped to a dull throbbing.

"Sir?" Jarvid examined Ialin quizzically. "You know titles are unnecessary among old friends."

Ialin bit off a groan. The conversation had not even started, and he had already made his first mistake. He covered as best as he could. "Nothing else seems the same today. Last visit, Frida and I walked freely to the castle and crawled into a waiting bed. This time, we found ourselves surrounded like prisoners. Forgive me if I'm not sure exactly which protocols have changed."

Jarvid waved Ialin to a seat, still grinning. "Ah, so you noticed our heightened security."

"Five guards close enough to look up my backside and tell me what I had for dinner?" Ialin accepted the proffered chair. "I noticed."

Jarvid huffed out a laugh and took the seat across from Ialin. The guards stationed themselves silently, still standing, at either hand.

Aisa reached over and, before Ialin could stop her, snipped off the top button of his shirt. He snatched for it as his collar flopped open, and she rewarded him with a sharp nip. Macaws found

adornments difficult to resist, and discomfort seemed to have a negative affect on Aisa's overlap. Ialin swore, then turned an apologetic look toward the chamberlain. "I lose more buttons that way."

The chamberlain's smile had become a fixture. "I've seen you do the same to her, with more interesting results." He winked at the parrot, who ignored him, clutching the button in a claw while she gnawed it into glittering pieces.

"The security?" Ialin reminded.

Jarvid took the flagon and poured two mugs full. The wine smelled as heady and sweet as a flower bouquet, Ialin knew the taste would surpass anything he had ever tried, but he could not afford to put much alcohol into his slight figure. He needed every scrap of his wits about him. "We've captured the rebel leader. We know they'll attempt a rescue." The chamberlain slid a mug toward Ialin.

Ialin caught the handle, then released it quickly so as not to reveal his quivering hands. Vernon shifted in his pocket, and he quieted the mouse with a touch. "You know Frida and I are not for sale." He crinkled his face. "Especially to rebels."

"Of course." Jarvid took the first sip, which Ialin found reassuring. If someone had poisoned the wine, the royal would succumb as well. "But they have some sort of magic that changes faces. I'm afraid everyone is suspect. And we didn't expect you for another... half year."

Ialin raised his own mug to delay his response. He had to assume every royal utterance a test. He did not know exactly how long Eshwyn intended to go between visits to the castle. Usually, he came about four times per year, but that varied. Ialin had to decide if he needed to correct the chamberlain, without outthinking himself. He took a tiny sip of a honey-based wine that enticed him to have more, then lowered the mug with a contented sigh. "You've outdone yourself. This wine is good enough for the gods." In that moment, he decided to play the odds. "You meant quarter year, didn't you?"

"Quarter year, yes," Jarvid corrected. "What did I say?"

Aisa nibbled playfully at Ialin's check, then squawked out, "Half year."

The chamberlain stiffened, then the smile eased back onto his face. "Ah, yes. Thank you, Frida."

Ialin continued as if he had not noticed the sudden breaking of the bird's silence or the error clearly intended to test his identity, "Came upon an unexpected load of *vilegro*. Thought I'd bring it by before it gets unusable. If I'd known I'd come at a bad time, I'd have waited a few more days."

"Half a day would have been enough." The chamberlain sat back with his mug. "The rat will be dead at midday."

Terror flashed through Ialin. Before he could think to suppress it, his nostrils flared and his hands clenched in his lap. Aisa seized another death grip on his ear. Though glad for the distraction of the pain, Ialin swiftly found it unbearable. He grabbed the jagged, black beak, winching it open with thumb and forefinger to free his aching ear. "Damn it, Frida. That hurts!"

"I'm sorry." Aisa hunched into herself remorsefully, feathers ruffled and beak low.

"A hanging?" Ialin tried to keep his question matter-of-fact, though his voice broke a bit at the end.

"No." Jarvid studied his guest. "The king's Otherworld adviser came up with something more interesting that didn't require taking the rat outside where the traitors might manage a public and humiliating rescue." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Just between you and me..."

Ialin knew Eshwyn might interrupt with something sarcastic about the presence of the two guards making them four, but he did not wish to distract the chamberlain from what seemed like a crucial point.

"she scares me. She's always had a wicked streak, hut it's as wide as the Anale River since the fire damaged her and Prince Hardin. You know, she actually tried to talk His Majesty into letting her breed

those dragons. Making more dragons. Deliberately. Can you believe such a thing?"

Ialin could scarcely believe his luck. Apparently, Eshwyn held high favor with Jarvid to have become privy to such secrets. He plastered a look of horror on his conjured features. "That's all Barakhai needs. A whole flock of enormous, carnivorous, magic-wielding monsters soaring through its skies." He shook his head. "You're right. The girl is mad." He tried to add casually, as a natural extension of the conversation. "But His Majesty is a wise man." The compliment came easily. Though the rebels struggled against his policies, especially his prejudices against magic and *Random* unions, they found the king himself reasonably just and intelligent most of the time. "Surely, he wouldn't let her do something so stupid."

"Of course not." The chamberlain took another sip of wine while the guards stirred restively. "He reinstated their executions, which should have happened years ago. Carrie went crazier than usual. It was a marvelous debate, though it was a foregone conclusion, of course. She did manage to talk him into letting her be the one who... ended their suffering." Jarvid dropped back into that secretive whisper. "The guards haven't had to perform a single execution in over a year. They just bind the condemned, place him on a cart, and turn him over to Carrie. I think she actually enjoys killing."

Ialin hunched into himself, hoping it was not a common trait among those of Carrie Quinton's world. He did not wholly trust Collins' judgment, but he did not believe the man would intentionally harm them. His blunders seemed more a result of ignorance and incompetence than cruelty. Ialin dropped his own head to his chin, and his volume fell to Jarvid's level. "So she put the dragons to death?"

Jarvid shrugged. "She must have. No sign of them since she led them into the mustier regions of the dungeon. The old torture area. As far as I know, no one's used those old devices for centuries, certainly not His Majesty, nor King Terrin's father."

Another hot wave of horror shot through Ialin. If he believed Jarvid, and the chamberlain's confidences seemed sincere, the royal family had had nothing to do with moving the dragons. Quinton had duped them just as she had the rebels, and only Prinivere's mind reading had rescued them from believing the same lie. But *how does one woman handle the care and feeding of dragons alone?* He bated the answer that seeped into his mind. *She's feeding them... the condemned.* Nausea flooded his gut, and acid crawled up his throat. *But how does she come and go safely through caverns filled with the descendants of carnivores to do it?* Ialin cleared his throat and swallowed painfully, forcing a return to the mindset of Eshwyn the merchant. *Is all this even true or just another test?* He looked up in time to see the chamberlain gesturing subtly to one of his guards.

Ialin gritted his teeth, clamping his fingers in his lap, hoping he had not made a serious miscalculation.

"So," Jarvid said carefully. "How did you know about the dragons? This is the first time I mentioned them to you."

"Indeed." Ialin scrambled to save his cover. "I thought it more polite to take the details from context rather than question your memory or your sanity." It was a bold move that might offend the chamberlain, but it seemed the best way out of a bad situation. Thus far, he had performed better than even he had expected. He had anticipated switching to his second plan long before now and worried that his and Aisa's switch-time might come upon them during an inopportune situation.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Then you won't mind one more test, Eshwyn?"

Ialin folded his arms over his chest. "Actually, I'm tired and irritable and sick of the games. There's no law that says I have to offer the king my best wares first."

Jarvid chuckled, this time without amusement. "Of course not, but who else could afford to pay you



what they're worth?"

Ialin could hardly argue the point. "Haven't I proved myself well enough yet?" He had little choice but to dissuade the chamberlain from any tests now, before he administered one. Ialin might manage to pass it; he had so far, but he dared not take the chance. His best gamble lay in pretending to take offense at treatment he considered unconscionably rude.

Jarvid ignored Ialin's protestations. "Did you bring what you promised the younger princess on your next visit?"

Ialin dodged the query, keeping the edge in his tone. "I brought only *vilegro*." He ran a hand down Aisa's back, a prearranged signal for her to start looking for an avenue of escape. If he distracted the guards, she might manage to evade them.

The chamberlain held Ialin's gaze. "Very well. Tell me what you promised her, then."

"That," the hummingbird/man replied stiffly, "is between me and Princess Lahtishah."

"Is it?"

"It is."

Jarvid's dark eyes glinted like diamonds. The guards' hands drifted toward their belts. "Then tell me, Eshwyn. What did I ask you to bring?"

The possibilities were endless. Only one answer seemed to provide better than the same miniscule odds. "Sir, you asked for... nothing."

"Is that your answer?"

Ialin read tension in every line of Jarvid's face. He hedged his bets. "If you asked for a specific item, I don't recall it."

"Even if your life depends on it?" The chamberlain made a gesture that sent one guard to the door and the other to wrap his fingers around his hilt. "Because... it does."

There was nothing more Ialin could say, nothing except a wild guess or a plea for his life. He shrugged one shoulder, Aisa rising and falling with the movement, and hoped she took the cue. The instant the door swung open, revealing all five of the guards who had brought Ialin there, Aisa swooped toward them.

Swords rasped from sheaths.

Concerned for Aisa's safety, Ialin scooped up his mug and hurled it at the clot of guardsmen in the doorway. Wine splashed the front rank, spoiling their aim, and the macaw wove through them in a blur of blue and gold. The mug caught one in the shoulder, staggering him into the woman who had earlier taken Ialin's arm. Both crashed to the floor, but the others split around them, two chasing after the retreating bird, the other two, including the elite guard who had opened the door, charging for Ialin.

Ialin remained in place, not bothering to run. He could never make it through the guards alive, and his death served no purpose. One of the chamberlain's elite guardians hurled himself at the still-seated guest. Ialin ducked under his wildly waving sword. The man crashed against him, sending the chair careening over backward. Ialin twisted with the fall, following the momentum in a light backward somersault to spare himself serious injury. He never made it to his feet. A guard's sword at his throat stopped him in an awkward crouch, and the elite guard's weight pinned his legs to the floor.

Ialin held out his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I won't fight; please don't hurt me." He kept his voice steady, revealing none of the cold squiggles of fear dancing through his chest. To sound defiant might goad them to attack, but helplessness panic was also known to arouse some dogs to go after prey. Jarvid's other bodyguard hauled the chamberlain out of harm's way. The guards who had fallen scrambled to their feet and moved to block both exits.

Jarvid stepped toward Ialin, to the obvious discomfort of his bodyguard. "Disarm yourself, rebel."

Ialin forced himself to remain calm and as still as his racing metabolism allowed. His successes of the last hour had made him believe the original plan might work, but he had already anticipated its failure. The assault on Opernes Castle was not yet lost. He glanced at the guards who held him in place. "Do I have permission to move?"

"They won't harm you," Jarvid promised. "So long as you cooperate."

The elite guard shifted his weight, freeing Ialin's legs, dragging some of the silk pantaloons with him as he moved. He stared at Ialin's ankles, looked at the chamberlain, then inclined his head toward the bared flesh between Ialin's cuffs and shoes.

Jarvid followed the gesture, then nodded in understanding.

Ialin knew they had found the crafted scar. *By the grace of all gods, let it fool them.* He rolled his eyes to the sword at his throat, pretending not to see the exchange.

The blade retreated slightly. With stiff, mighty movements, Ialin relieved himself of the utility knife he carried and tossed it to the floor. As he did so, he signaled Vernon with a touch to find a safer hiding place among the several layers of clothing he wore to pad his scrawny frame. The rest depended upon how thoroughly the guards searched him. If they simply patted him down, they would find nothing and believe him as large as he appeared. If they stripped him, the game would end here.

Jarvid's brown eyes met Ialin's again. Miraculously, they had softened. So far, he seemed to be convinced by Ialin's second, more mundane masquerade hidden beneath the first. The scar perfectly matched that of the bear/man, Draezon, well known to the royals since he had rescued a royal cousin, as a toddler, when she became hopelessly lost in a cold, dark forest. Bears were not usually liked or trusted. Of all the legal citizens of Barakhai, they were most likely to revert to cannibalism. Draezon had never done so, however, one of the few *durithrin* who learned social graces and interacted deliberately with the city folk. Once, he had blundered into a snare placed for a murderer. He had panicked in bear form, nearly severing his foot. The castle staff nursed him back to health, where he became a favorite of the children. The injury had left the familiar scar that Ialin had copied onto his ankle.

"Why, Draezon?" Jarvid asked softly.

Ialin thought he heard a hint of pain in the chamberlain's tone. He lowered his gaze, familiar with the bear/man's idiosyncrasies and comportment. They had worked together on several scouting projects for the rebels. "Y-you know... who I am?"

"Why would you turn against us? Against your liege? Against those who helped you in your time of greatest need?"

Ialin kept his head down, evading the chamberlain's gaze, as Draezon would. "I haven't turned against anyone." He balanced his explanation carefully. He needed to find the words that would keep him alive but still land him in the dungeon, nearer to Zylas. He had considered his backup operation as long and carefully as the original plan that his friends all knew about and assisted him with. If the royals discovered his true identity, they would kill him or, at best, place him in a container too small for his animal form to escape. A man who morphed into a bear could be safely kept in the regular prison, though its widely spaced bars would easily allow a hummingbird passage. "I never intended to hurt anyone, nor have I. I just wanted to make sure you didn't either."

Footsteps pounded up the stairway, and the two guards who had chased after Aisa returned, still panting from the chase. "She got away, sir," one announced.

Jarvid's teeth clamped together, and his breath escaped in a sharp hiss that corresponded perfectly with Ialin's relieved sigh.

Despite the simultaneity of the noises, the chamberlain heard. "Are you finding joy in our misfortune, Draezon?"

"No, sir." Ialin finally raised his head. "I'm finding joy in an innocent woman's fortune." Now, he met Jarvid's dark stare. "I'm willing to accept her punishment as well as my own."

The elite guard snorted. "You can only die once, traitor."

Jarvid raised a hand that silenced the guard. "I'll listen to Draezon."

Ialin resisted the urge to glare at the guard. The gentle bear/man would not act in such a petty fashion. "The parrot has little overlap and knew nothing of this mission. I took her with me only as a prop."

"And your mission?" Jarvid asked matter-of-factly.

Ialin shook his head. "I can't answer that."

The chamberlain's eyes narrowed.

Before he could speak, Ialin threw the man a crumb. "But I can tell you my reasons."

Jarvid took the bait, though he still looked dangerously perturbed. "Your reasons for turning traitor?"

"I don't see it that way. I see it as protecting my children."

"You're a *Regular*," Jarvid reminded the man he assumed was Draezon.

Though Ialin came of a *Random* union, he could not argue the point when it came to Draezon's background. "And my wife, too. My goose wife. Our children—"

"—are perfectly legal *Randoms*, sanctioned by the kingdom, who have done very well for themselves."

"And others." Ialin allowed a smile to cross his lips, trying to appear like a proud father. "A dog guard in Ash-tar, awarded for courage. And a chipmunk who finds help for those in trouble in the most remote woodlands. The best children a father could have."

The smile returned to Jarvid's face, a careful echo. "Most fathers would say the same about their children."

"Perhaps." A full concession might diminish Ialin's point. "But your new law makes my children... criminal."

Jarvid shook his head, while the guards remained silently in place, attentive to every word of the exchange, to every movement of their prisoner. "The law isn't retroactive. It won't change the legitimacy of those already born. In fact, His Majesty delayed the institution of it to allow not only those inside their mothers to come into the world honestly but allowed several extra months for *Random* couples who wished to marry or to create another baby or litter before the ban was struck. I believe that more than fair, don't you?"

"Reasonable," Ialin gave where he could. "Which I always expect from His Majesty. "But had I lived at a later time, my love for Cellia would have been forever denied, my children would not exist..."

Though Jarvid's expression revealed sympathy, his words did not show the same understanding. "Love denied is difficult, but fatal only to the weak of heart. Eventually, you would have found a bear to love and marry. I know it's hard to imagine others in the place of the children you have, but you would have loved your bear children as much as your current ones. *Lesariat* cats trade kittens all the time; it's the ones you raise, the ones who call you 'Poppa' that you love, no matter where they come from or how they appear. Life would not be worse, I assure you. Only different."

Ialin considered his next approach. He could have discussed the flaws in the king's decree all day and appreciated the chance to get heard by a member of the royal family, a feat he could never have

accomplished on his own. But he could feel the pressure of a switch to bird form that would come upon him too soon for long conversations.

Apparently interpreting Ialin's silence as skepticism,

Jarvid continued, "Marriage and mating laws have limited the royal family much longer and more harshly than any others." He shrugged. "Some sacrifices are necessary for the good of Barakhai and her future. It's up to all of us to make them."

Ialin thought he detected a note of deeply engrained sorrow. Running only on instinct, he tried, "Like you, sir?"

Jarvid's eyes widened in clear surprise. "I've loved and lost," he admitted. "To marry a switcher would mean forever leaving a family that needs me."

Ialin knew that a formal, permanent union with a switcher would strip Jarvid of his royal status, yet he had little to lose by consorting with whomever he chose to in secret. A child born of any such liaison would assume the form of the mother forever and, therefore, be considered a *Regular*. To assure herself and her offspring special treatment, she would gladly claim not to remember a tryst that would seem to have occurred in animal form.

"What about the creatures denied *Regular* marriages who are now forbidden from *Random* ones as well?"

Jarvid's lids rose even further. "You mean... vermin?"

"Yes."

"You think we need more vermin?"

Having risked his life to rescue one such vermin while another lay hidden in the folds of his clothing, Ialin found an answer difficult. "I'm not sure that would harm anything. But even setting aside that part of the argument, snakes and mice spend half of their lives as people, too. Shouldn't they have a right to extra hands on the farm, offspring to try their patience and bring tears of joy to their eyes? My younglings are the source of my greatest joys and sorrows."

Jarvid retook his seat, though Ialin remained on the floor. He rubbed his naked, dimpled chin. "An interesting point, worth consideration. I could discuss that with the king's brother. Perhaps Prince Hardin and His Majesty would be willing to work out an arrangement with widows and orphans, those with unwanted or excessive offspring."

Stunned silent, Ialin remained in place. The enmity between royalty and rebels had gone on too long for meaningful dialogue. The king had long ago made it clear that he would jail or execute any rebel who dared set foot, claw, or wing on the castle grounds. Yet, the rebels might find an ally, albeit a harsh one, in the chamberlain for visiting merchants. Of course, the "compromise" fell far short of acceptable to any but the most conservative of the rebel forces. Most would settle for nothing less than complete freedom when it came to creating families and choosing mates, and Zylas would never consent to what now amounted to an absolute ban on mating for those animals considered undesirable. Ialin had to agree. For now, the kingdom had chosen to breed out only vermin. How long before the prohibition spread to include others the royals found less desirable until whole groups of creatures disappeared from the world forever?

It was an argument Ialin did not have time to make, even if he believed it might prove fruitful. None of this mattered anyway if they managed to liberate the dragons and they could lift the Curse that had so long plagued the world of Barakhai. "Chamberlain Jarvid, I'm afraid I have nothing more to say."

Jarvid nodded as the guards studied him expectantly. Finally, he spoke the words that Ialin hated but needed to hear. "Take him to the dungeon. When court is finished, King Terrin will deal with him." He

gave Ialin a pleading look. "I like you, Draezon. I hope you'll think things through and decide to talk willingly."

Ialin gave no reply as the guards of Opernes Castle led him away.

## Chapter 10

COLLINS buzzed to bleary awareness without any memory of having fallen asleep. He ached all over. *Why?* A warm tongue massaged the flesh between the crudely bound tatters of his shirt. *Korfius*, his mind told him. He opened his eyes to fuzzy grayness. Dusty mucus glued his eyelashes together, and he raised a hand to wipe the mess away. At his movement, the animal stiffened with a high-pitched yelp that ill-suited a hound. Toenails scraped over Collins' already abraded back, and a puppy much smaller than Korfius skittered and tumbled into view. The world followed: a dirty, rocky dreariness that denned the inner reaches of a cave. Memory flooded back and, with it, panicky understanding. Before he could stop himself, Collins screamed.

The puppy scrambled into retreat, whip-tail tucked between its legs. It ran behind a boulder and disappeared from Collins' sight.

As the sound echoed gradually into silence, Collins cringed at his own stupidity. *A terrified shriek of distress. No, that won't attract more carnivores.* He turned his attention to his injuries. His back and scalp felt as if someone had slashed them repeatedly against a giant grater. Every breath reminded him of his bruised ribs, and his hip and head throbbed. He had suffered broken bones on his last visit to Barakhai and did not think he had any now, though his left arm sagged. He supposed he might have fractured his collarbone, dislocated his shoulder, or torn some tendons there.

A noise clicked through Collins' hearing, and he jerked his head toward it. The sudden movement sent vertigo crushing down on him and a lead weight of pain slamming through his head. Suddenly, he felt even less sure about his assessment; he might also have a skull fracture. That thought brought a trickle of fear. He could not forget his anatomy professor's warning that knocking someone out was not the benign process action/adventure movies would have viewers believe. If a man blacked out for longer than a minute, he might well have sustained a lethal injury. *I couldn't have been out long, or that damned cat would have eaten me by now.*

Collins raised his arm to consult his watch, only to find the puppy staring at him from behind the rock. Woolly with youth, it had a short, rounded snout, ears that stuck up in sharp triangles, and enormous brown eyes. Cowlike patches of black and white splattered its ribby body. *All Barakhain dogs are guards*, Collins reminded himself. *And only absolute carnivores live here.* He looked at the animal, trying to discern some feature that might reveal it as the equivalent of an African or Indian wild dog, but it looked more like a husky- or malamute-cross, perhaps three months old.

With slow, deliberate motions, Collins freed himself from his backpack and crouched.

The puppy watched him, head tipped sideways. It remained still, its back half hidden behind the boulder.

Collins' mind lurched through details he had already considered. *Any kind of Random breedings could have happened here through the centuries.* He fumbled in his pocket, freeing a dog biscuit which he held out toward the pup.

The dog's nose twitched. It did not otherwise move, continuing to study Collins.

Breaking the biscuit in half, Collins tossed one piece in a gentle arc. It fell to the uneven floor, sliding toward the puppy, who backpedaled farther behind the stone. Its nose wiggled again, and it craned its neck toward the offering. It raised a paw with obvious caution, then eased forward. Another wary step followed. It reached its muzzle as far forward as possible to sniff at the biscuit piece. It glanced at Collins one more time, seeming reassured by his stillness. Finally, it scooped the biscuit into its jaws and crunched it down, lapping up every last crumb. It looked expectantly at Collins.

Smiling, Collins held out the rest of the biscuit. The dog trotted toward him, gait slowing as it drew nearer. It stopped just beyond his reach, sat, and waited.

Collins stretched out his arm as far as possible. The puppy snatched the biscuit from his hand, then retreated a few steps to eat it. While it did, Collins reached into his pocket again, drawing out a piece of jerky. He offered it to the dog.

This time, the puppy took the meat from Collins' hand, bolting it down without any visible chewing. Its oversized, underfurred tail waved wildly, overbalancing the puppy in a wobbly dance. As it worked down the food, Collins ran a hand along its head, scratching behind the fuzzy ears. In clear ecstasy, the puppy sat, tipping its head toward the man's touch. It sniffed Collins' fingers, then licked off the remaining grease and spices.

Collins looked up to find a full-sized version of the puppy watching quietly from the entryway. He swallowed hard, searching for the sword Iain had insisted he bring. He had not thought to use it against the cougar; its assault had immediately separated him from his backpack and the blade thrust through the strap. He did not see the weapon and dared not make the necessary visual sweep to find it, which would require losing track of the full-grown dog. He groped blindly at his belt, but the knife had apparently also gone missing. Left with nothing but his wits, Collins debated whether to try to stare down the beast. The dominance maneuver might backfire if the dog chose to accept what amounted to a challenge.

Collins swallowed his terror. The dog might sense it, and that, too, could drive it to attack. Trying to appear in control, he casually reached back into the pocket for another stick of jerky. The puppy lunged for the treat; but, before its sharp little teeth closed around the jerky, Collins lobbed it toward the adult dog. The puppy skittered after the meat, nails scratching against stone, barking furiously.

Collins cringed. The sound might draw others. Or, he realized, it might drive some, like the cougar, away.

The adult walked toward the jerky as the puppy came careening after it. The youngster missed, lost its footing, and crashed into the larger dog with a startled yelp. Seeming not to notice the collision, the adult hefted the meat in gentle jaws, bit off half, then dropped the rest. The puppy snapped up its share. The grown dog yapped out a single bark, paused, then barked twice more.

Collins stiffened at what sounded frighteningly like a signal. He knew canines of every sort hunted in packs.

As if to confirm his worst suspicions, movement rustled and rattled through the cavern, filled with the click of nails on stone, the swish of fur or fabric, and other small sounds he found harder to identify. His torch had burned out, so he reached with a measured, fluid motion into the backpack for another. A flick of a match set it aflame to reveal a grim semicircle of creatures hemming him against the rock formation. Humans of both genders interspersed with a surprising variety of animals, including a lioness, an orangutan, and a massive tortoise.

Collins nearly dropped the torch. He pressed his back against the stones, studying the crowd of creatures around him. Even at full strength, he could not fight all of them; the lion alone would do him in.

A lean, bearded man standing between the lioness and the tortoise cleared his throat. "You..."

understand... me?" He enunciated each word, as if addressing a deaf foreigner of dubious mental functioning, and he held Collins' sword in his hand.

Collins kept the torch in front of him, mind racing, trying to decide his best course of action. He could feign confusion but doubted anything good would come of that. They might speak freely in front of someone they believed didn't know what they were saying, but he would rather know his fate sooner and directly. "Every word," he responded.

Murmurs swept the human members of the group. Collins glanced around at them, realizing that what at first had seemed like a hundred was probably more like twelve. Besides the two dogs, the lioness, the ape, and the tortoise, he saw a bat dangling from the ceiling. Seven humans, four male and three female, closed the ranks. Though some sported well-defined muscles, they all appeared slender; and one woman looked as if she suffered from anorexia nervosa, a walking skeleton. Some wore tattered loincloths while others stood brazenly naked. They all had long hair, lank and uneven, though reasonably clean.

"Come with us," the speaker said.

Nodding, Collins secured his backpack and hefted it. The strap rubbed against an open wound, and he cringed. Getting fully to his feet proved harder. Dizziness assailed him in a rush of swirling spots and squiggles. He took an awkward step, uncertain of directions, not even sure about up and down. He struggled against gravity.

More incomprehensible whispers swept the group, and the animals stirred restlessly.

Collins held utterly still as his vision stabilized. Barely trusting himself to speak, he managed, "I'm hurt."

"Yes." The speaker revealed nothing with his tone. "Come."

Collins walked toward the bearded man, and the mixed group filled in the growing gap behind him. The circle tightened, though not enough to keep him from escaping under normal circumstances. The idea of running now incited a raw bubble of nausea. His balance would surely fail him.

The creatures nearest the speaker turned, glancing over their shoulders as they slid, in single file, through an opening Collins had not yet explored. He soon found himself in a small, rough-hewn cave filled with the obligatory stony growths on floor and ceiling. The bearded man led the way through one of that cavern's several exits and into a grotto. There, Collins saw an unusually large number of ledges shadowing a network of low, tunnellope openings and three larger entrances, including the jagged hole they had glided through. A stream wound along one edge, disappearing into a hole on the same side. Each entrance had a guard, one a man holding a pole, another a massive, grizzled wolf, the third a petite woman who looked as if she could not defend herself from her own shadow.

The man who had spoken gestured at a rocky prominence. Though free of slime or moss, it looked shiny with damp. Collins' aching body begged him to rest, but he dared take no chance of offending. "May I sit down, please?"

"Please do," said a voluptuous naked woman with the darkest skin and hair Collins had ever seen. She might have passed for an aboriginal African in his world except that she had threadlike lips, a long, narrow nose, and eyes that appeared more yellow than brown. Her inky hair fell in knotty straightness nearly to her knees, though it covered nothing women of his world would have considered significant for modesty.

Collins plopped heavily down on the ledge, feeling as if he had survived a journey through a wood chipper. He adjusted the crude bandage on his head and dropped the backpack beside him. "My name is Benton Collins," he said. "You can call me Ben."

"Ben," the original speaker repeated. The man held the sword awkwardly. Clearly, he knew or had surmised its purpose, but he had no experience with such a weapon. "Who are you, Ben?"

Collins thought he had already answered that question with his name. He tried to guess the reason for the question, what he would want to know were he the captor. But, first, he needed to figure out the purpose of this mismatched group; and his thoughts slogged through light-headedness and pain for an answer. "I'm from another world. One without switchers and switch-forms."

The way-too-skinny woman piped in, "Are you a royal?"

Collins bit his lower lip, uncertain of the consequences of answering with truth or various lies. He had no way of knowing whether this group held royalty in awed esteem or despised them for inflicting this life of anarchy and imprisonment upon them. The king's ancestors had literally visited the sins of the parents onto the sons and daughters; yet, the current king and his relatives were also innocent descendants. Not *that that simple, clearheaded and obvious reasoning prevents wars and resentment in my own world*. Preferring to die for honesty than deceit, Collins stuck with the truth. "My world..." he recognized the fallacy of the statement he was about to make and amended it even as he spoke, "... at least my part of it, doesn't have royalty."

Glances circumnavigated the room. They seemed surprised by Collins' pronouncement, which made sense. Having lived under no other form of government, they might find it difficult to understand how others could. Even in his own world, Collins sometimes found it hard to see how communism had flourished and countries continued to accept monarchs, even if only as figureheads. On the other hand, he had loved science and math and suffered through subjects like history, geography, and social studies. He did not consider himself a stereotypical scientist who saw the whole world in black and white: provable theories versus ungrounded superstition. He had even dated a psychology student, albeit unsuccessfully.

The original speaker summed up the modicum of information they had gathered. "So you're not a royal, and yet you also have no switch-form."

"Correct." The snail's pace of the interview ground on Collins, who suddenly remembered the limitations on his time. He finally glanced at his watch. It read 11:08 a.m., to his horror. "Oh, my God! I've got to get moving." He would never have guessed how long he had lain unconscious, curled around his backpack, on the stones. The presence of this gang of switchers, including the dogs, must have kept the cougar from returning to finish him.

Humans and animals alike stared at Collins. Clearly, they believed his ability to go or stay depended wholly on them. And, Collins realized, they were essentially right. He could only attempt to prod them along.

Collins wrenched open his backpack. "Listen, you all seem nice enough, but the life of a man and a cause depend on me hauling ass out of here right now." He seized the Snickers bars and held them up. "Here. You'll like these." Even as he tossed them, Collins had a sudden wild thought. He had read that chocolate was poisonous to most of the animals people kept as pets. On the other hand, he had fed candy to his cat and hamster without any harmful effects that he knew of, and the animals he now faced spent half their lives as humans.

The puppy ran toward the bounty, but its father stopped it with a well-placed paw. The lioness sniffed one candy bar carefully, and a short, sinewy man who had not yet spoken hefted the other two. As he studied them, Collins remembered to add through his pounding headache, "Take the paper off first. The good stuff's inside."

Using his teeth, the man ripped the wrapper and sent it floating to the ground. He took a bite of the Snickers, and a smile lit his face. "This is... great!" He hefted it like a trophy. "Best food I've ever eaten." He handed the one he had tasted to the scrawny girl, who took a delicate nibble.

Her eyes widened. "Delicious."

The short man opened the other two candy bars and passed them around the group while Collins emptied his pockets of dog biscuits and jerky. "You can have all of these, too." No longer worrying



about an attack, he went through his pack, emptying it of everything he could spare. Not only could those things work as bribes, but shedding them would lighten his load tremendously. "Here're some clothes. You look like you could use these." He left the selection of T-shirts, jeans, underwear, and socks on the ledge beside him. Finding the medicine bottle, Collins sorted through the Turns to find three Tylenols, which he forced down without water, using several hard swallows and all the saliva he could muster. He returned the bottle to his pack. The Barakhain prisoners could probably use the medicine, too; but he did not want to take the time to explain it. He also kept his toiletries, the binoculars, keys, watch, and beeper but left the speaker wire he had used to lead Falima to the biology laboratory. He looked up at no one in particular. "Now, does any of that buy me the freedom to find the lost dragons?"

The prisoners in human form tore their gazes from the pile to glance at Collins, clearly bewildered. The short man who had opened the Snickers spoke first. "The lost what?"

"Dragons," Collins repeated dutifully, though he doubted that would prove enough. "Humongous scaly creatures with lots of sharp teeth."

"Like the one who attacked you?" the skinny woman tried.

Collins shook his head. "No. No. That's a large furry creature with sharp teeth. I'm talking about dragons. Bigger. Just scales all over. Hairless wings." He glanced up to see two bats hanging upside down from a stalactite over his head and looked for the words to differentiate the dragons from them, without resorting to the word "scales" again. "Enormous creatures. Like alligators with wings, but bigger than elephants."

The humans traded glances, and Collins now realized that more had joined them. New animals had arrived as well, including an ocelot and a bobcat, who must have crept out from holes beneath the ledges. Some of the newcomers examined Collins' offerings, and a naked preteen girl began raking them into piles.

Collins stopped describing. Ultimately, it did not matter. "Look, if I can get those dragons out of this place, they can make magic that takes away that involuntary shape-changing... curse thingy."

Captivated either by Collins' words or his excitement, the group kept every eye focused directly upon him. No one spoke.

Collins delivered what he thought would prove the coup de grace. "You can all walk out of this prison as easily as I walked in." He waited for applause or cheering, anything to show they understood the significance of his revelation.

Instead, they all looked at him curiously. The original speaker cleared his throat. "Prison?"

Skinny Girl added, "Walk out to where?"

The triumphant grin that had crept across Collins' face with his final pronouncement withered. "To—to the real world. The world beyond these inescapable caverns." Sudden realization hit him low in the gut. These switchers knew little or nothing of their history. To them, the entire planet began and ended at the barriers thwarting their escape. The river, with its life-giving water and the objects outsiders tossed into it, was probably a god to them.

"To your world?" the girl continued. "Where there're no switches or switch-forms. No royalty."

"No, no, no." Collins slapped the heel of his hand against the knot of torn T-shirt on his forehead, further worsening his headache. "You live in a small part of Barakhai. Out there, there's a whole... " He avoided the term "world" this time. "... a whole other place, more of Barakhai, with buildings and sunshine, towns and villages, where people don't worry that their neighbors might eat them. I come from somewhere else. Somewhere farther, separated from Barakhai by magic." He did not know what to name it, uncertain how the spell might translate English terms such as "The World" or "Earth," especially since he could not even say whether or not he had left the planet or the scientifically known universe.

*With my luck, Earth would come out as Dirt.*

The human fraction of the group whispered among themselves, while the animals shifted from paw to paw.

Uncertain whether or not he had clarified things or muddled the situation even more, Collins tried to think it through. He believed he understood how such a strange bunch of creatures had come together. Likely, it had started with animals who tended to herd or pack and with human counterparts with an eye toward family and protection of those weaker, including their own offspring. Some of the stronger, less social creatures, like the cougar, preferred to spend most of their lives alone. Others might band solely for the purpose of hunting or procreation, such as pure inbred packs of wolves or prides of lions. A group as mismatched as the one that had discovered him had to have security and companionship in mind. Otherwise, the fiercest would already have devoured those most vulnerable. Amid the chaos of eternal imprisonment, at least this one civilized society had emerged, perhaps more. He had to play on their sense of community.

Collins felt utterly beaten. His head pounded, as prone to shatter as a glass-blown figurine. He ached in a million places, and the thought of dragging his tattered body one step farther made him cringe. Nevertheless, he gathered what little energy remained and declared, "I'm sorry I don't have time to explain any more. If I don't leave now, my mission will fail." It was not technically true. Even with Zylas gone, he could still complete the ultimate goal. "And a good man will die for nothing."

Collins tilted his chin, a defiant gesture that nearly cost him his consciousness. "I'm leaving. If you stop me, I will fight with every ounce of strength left in my body." *Yeah, that ought to last about a second.*

The tortoise started toward him, through a silence that admitted only the steady water-song of the stream. Enormous, paddlelike feet heaved the huge shell forward in a lumbering style that precluded speed. Collins clambered off the ledge to meet her, the simple gesture pounding him with exhaustion and dizziness. He hoped Ialin, Falima, Ver-non, and Aisa fared better, because it seemed unlikely he would ever make it to the dragons. *In time.* The downward spiral of his thoughts quickened. *Oh, come on, Ben. Don't let hope turn you into a fool. If the dragons were here, someone would certainly have seen them.*

Collins dropped to his haunches, and the tortoise practically climbed into his lap to meet his gaze levelly. One ancient, clay-colored eye met both of his, and the burden of its one foot on his thigh crushed him against stone. The tortoise had to weigh two or three hundred pounds. Uncertain of its purpose, or the best way to pet a reptile, he reached out a careful hand and set it gently on the animal's head. "Scaly," he murmured. "Scaly, like this."

The long, tortoise neck stretched from its domed shell. If Collins added even a vestigial tail, the creature had to measure a good four feet. He froze, uncertain how to react as the tortoise laid its beaked head upon his shoulder.

A redhead with a scarred face explained, "Mataia approves of you. She's the oldest and wisest of us, and we will help you."

Relieved, Collins gave the tortoise's neck a gentle hug, then scratched the scales on the top of her head. Though akin to stroking large-grained sandpaper, the gesture was the only one he could think of to express his appreciation. *She's human, too, stupid. Probably with great overlap.* "Thank you," Collins told Mataia. He looked past her enormous form to the humans and animals beyond, "And thank all of you, too. I'm not sure how you can help, but—" A possibility came to Collins even as he spoke the words. "Did any of you hear the sound I played on my recorder?"

The teenaged girl continued to sort through the food and clothing Collins had given them, and two boys who looked like they were about eight or nine years old came over to help her. The rest of the group continued to regard Collins in silence.

Realizing "recorder" might not have translated, Collins clarified, "I brought a sound with me. Until it broke, I used my little box thing to make it."

The black woman held up the smashed remains of the recorder, and Collins wondered where she had hidden it until that moment. He guessed someone had his knife as well.

"Yes, that's it! Did you hear it?"

Several of the humans, and even some of the animals, bobbed their heads. Mataia eased off of Collins' thigh, to his relief. His leg buzzed with a pins and needles sensation, and he cringed through the pain of returning circulation.

"Is that what you're looking for?" a middle-aged man in a loincloth asked, the only human in the gathering with gray in his hair. "The monsters who make that sound?"

"That's them!" Collins said, too excited to question the term "monsters."

The black woman made a decisive gesture. "Come with us, then." Her voice sounded inexplicably tired. "We'll take you there."

Once imprisoned, Ialin allowed his agitation free rein, pacing the confines of his dungeon cell relentlessly to work off a long-suppressed tide of nervous energy. He ceased caring about keeping up appearances. Even a usually composed bear could be expected to demonstrate discomfort when locked in a cage anticipating questioning and, possibly, execution.

As instructed, Vernon returned before Ialin's switch, though time would tell whether or not the mouse had located Zylas during his absence. It seemed long enough to the hummingbird/man for Vernon to have found an army of missing renegades, yet Ialin never trusted his own concept of time. Others tended to find him irritatingly impatient.

This time, Ialin did not heft the mouse, instead turning his back to his guard and pretending to lie down for a rest. The fuzzy gray rodent stood, planting his forepaws on Ialin's magically sculpted nose. The man kept his voice low. "At my switch time, you distract the guard." Though it required more words, Ialin dared not leave details to an animal who, like himself, had incomplete overlap. "Make something fall with a noise. Pick an object behind or beside him, so he doesn't look toward me."

The guard's voice boomed through the prison. "Did you say something, Draezon?"

Ialin twitched his nose until Vernon dropped to the floor. He glanced over his shoulder at the guard. "Just berating myself."

The guard chuckled. "For what you did or for getting caught?"

"I haven't decided yet."

The guard laughed harder. A tall, lanky man with unkempt brown hair, he would clearly transform into some trim, hungry-looking dog.

Ialin turned his head back and hissed at Vernon. The change would soon be upon him. "Go."

As Vernon scampered into the shadows, Ialin loosened the layers of shirting that swaddled his slight frame. Becoming entangled would ruin his well-laid plan. A familiar tingle throbbed through his skin as he worked harder to shove down the cloth. *Hurry up, Vernon.* Ialin glued his gaze to the bars, solid iron with barely a spot of rust. The guards had clearly chosen a secure cell, afraid he might bend or damage the bars in bear form, just as he had hoped. He dared not become complacent, however. Many things had gone well with the previous plan, only to fail him when it mattered most. He could not count on anything going smoothly. A wave of warmth shunted through him, heralding the change. *Vernon!*

Falling metal crashed against the stone floor, followed by the sound of several more objects slamming and rolling. The guard spun, just as switch-form overtook Ialin. He felt himself shrinking, clothes flopping

to the floor, beak sprouting. He sprang into the air, lacy green wings beating madly, all but invisible. His body a blur, he flitted through the bars and out into the main portion of the dungeon.

Ialin scanned a scattering of dented pans and chamber pots, and a small gray figure racing from the carnage. From the air, he followed Vernon, not bothering to watch the guard's reaction. In a few moments, the man would notice that his prisoner was missing and call for assistance, Ialin only hoped his sudden disappearance would confuse them, and the mystery would take significant time to piece together. Even if they figured it out immediately, he believed they would expect him to escape, not wend his way deeper into the dungeons.

Vernon led Ialin through a prison filled with empty cells, into a storage room where he disappeared beneath piled up junk. Ialin hovered, willing himself to stay focused. He had decent overlap; and, where excitement tended to unbalance others, it made him more alert and attentive. His beadlike eyes scanned the floor, seeking movement. At first, he saw no sign of his companion. Then, he caught a sudden flash of gray from his left eye. He barreled toward it, an abrupt, midair stop all that saved him from crashing into another door. Vernon disappeared through the crack beneath it.

Ialin dove. Leading with his slender beak, he followed the mouse's retreating form beneath the door and into a dusty room sparsely filled with furniture covered in tattered sheets. On top of one flat surface that appeared to represent a chest of drawers sat a cage barely large enough to contain his own miniscule form. A naked, pink tail protruded between the bars.

Vernon leaped to the dangling edge of sheet draped over the chest and scrambled upward. Ialin hovered over the cage, peering at its inhabitant through one eye. The white fur, the bright red eyes, now dulled by pain, the pink ears laid tight against the ratty head—he knew those features, if not their broken demeanor. Vernon had, indeed, brought him to Zylas.

"Zylas," Ialin buzzed to the only person other than Prinivere who could understand him in animal form.

The pink nose twitched, and the muzzle rose. "Ialin?"

As the mouse finished his climb, Zylas' ratty expression grew even more hopeful. "Vernon. Can you help me?"

In animal form, it never occurred to Ialin to lie to comfort his friend. "I don't know. I'll try." He fluttered to the lock, wings beating with furious ease. He had used his delicate beak many times to thwart the skill of locksmiths, but this one looked like nothing he had ever seen. It appeared brand new, its shiny, silver surface some strange amalgam of iron, and it had a black knob with figures that might represent foreign letters or numbers inscribed on it. He saw no hole in which to insert his beak. He pecked at the front, and his beak slammed against a substance as hard as glass yet like nothing he had ever encountered.

Ialin returned to Zylas' face. "The lock. It's weird."

Zylas clamped his muzzle tightly. His position in the cage did not allow him to view the lock, and he had no room to turn. "Carriequinton put it on there." His voice had a quaver to it that Ialin usually associated only with his own jerky movements. "It might come from her world. I think she spun it when she put it on."

Ialin went back to the lock, tapping the knob with his beak. It did move slightly. He continued experimenting, hoping to stumble upon the correct series of movements.

"She taunts me," Zylas was telling Vernon. "Wants to be here when I... change. Wants to watch me die."

Ialin paused to chirp out, nearly subvocally, "You're not going to die."

"You've got the lock?" Zylas asked hopefully.

"No," Ialin admitted. "But I'm not going to stop trying till I do." He drove that promise deep into his soul, working at the knob frantically while Zylas addressed Vernon.

"You watch for Carriequinton. If you see her, squeak loudly, then hide. Both of you, hide."

"All right," they promised in unison, then Ialin went back to work.

## Chapter 11

BENTON Collins dragged through the carnivore caverns with an escort that included the lioness, the ocelot, the scrawny woman, and the bearded man who had first spoken to him. Exhausted from blood loss, assailed by a persistent headache scarcely alleviated by the Tylenol, fresh wounds throbbing, he staggered among the four with few verbal exchanges. They told him their names, but he retained only the last, Margast, and only because it reminded him of his ex-girlfriend, Marlys. At times, he discovered himself leaning heavily against the lioness' furry back. He always righted himself when he noticed it, glad she took no offense at his touch. One swipe of her enormous paw would send him tumbling, and he doubted he would ever regain his feet.

Collins staggered onward, though the reason seemed distant, and no strategy for handling the dragons once he found them came to mind. He was dimly aware that he would have to find a way to communicate with them, to convince them of the significance of following him back to the entrance where they could talk to Prinivere. She would likely have the words that he did not, the ones that might make them understand their role in rescuing every non-royal citizen of Barakhai. He hoped—and doubted—he could make it back to the cave opening with them. His body wanted only to lie down and surrender to sweet oblivion again, and the realization that a wandering carnivore might eat him barely overcame that desire. Inertia more than intent, the familiarity of forward movement surrounded by shapechangers, kept him going when even need failed.

Even though Collins glanced repeatedly at his watch, even though he had to force every step, time ticked by too fast for his liking. Every bone-weary step seemed to take a full minute, every one a beat closer to Zylas' death. *Please God, let Falima and the others be doing better than me.*

For over two switch times, two hours in Collins' world, Zylas listened to the click of Ialin's beak against plastic and metal, the muttered buzzing that indicated frustration. Though focused on this one task, Ialin's discomfort was gradually overcoming his overlap. With each failure, he became more birdlike and less human, which would impair his judgment when it came to perceiving the intricacies of the Otherworld lock. Driven to pace but confined to a quiver, Zylas concentrated on maintaining his own overlap. As his companions lost their humanity, he had to keep his as finely honed as possible. He shared Ialin's aggravation. If only he could turn around, he might find a way to aid them. He had explored the lock with his tail, knew its general feel and composition. He had yanked at the bar looping like an elongated semicircle through the matched tangs of the cage, but it seemed at least as solid and strong as the tangs themselves.

Cautiously, Zylas prodded Ialin, worried the hummingbird might become stuck on an untenable solution. "Try something different, my friend."

Ialin gave no reply but a tiny, bird grunt of assent.

Zylas' gaze swept the visible section of the room for the thousandth time. He could not see the trapdoor through which Carriequinton could descend at any moment. He only knew the scene in front of him: a wall thick with grime, including brown stains that could represent old blood as easily as dirt, the huge mirror the woman stared into obsessively, which showed her as she used to look. Prinivere's illusion spell had fallen. With the return of Quinton's scars had come a grotesque anger she vented with taunts. She had spoken of destroying Zylas' friends, his family, everything he held dear. She described in detail the fate that awaited him, the shattering of his bones into shards that would tear his insides like swallowed knives, the mangling of every body part, the puddle of blood his compacted body would leave on the floor. Zylas had become resigned to the likelihood of his death, and the cruel agony of its execution, yet he preferred to avoid it. He had dedicated his life to a worthy cause and wished to see it through. At least, he knew others now believed in it as strongly as he did. His death would not end the quest to lift the Curse hanging so long over Barakhai. So many others had become as serious in their devotion as he. *So close. So damned close.* He shut his eyes. *If only I could have seen it through.*

The sounds of Ialin's beak ceased. "Hole back," he said at length.

Zylas froze, knowing the broken speech meant Ialin was becoming too birdlike to communicate effectively much longer. "What?"

"Hole back. Hole back!"

Vernon scurried to the lock. "There's a keyhole on the back."

"On the back?" Zylas' lids flicked open. "I'll hunch as much as possible. Get out of your way. See what you can do, Ialin."

To Zylas' relief, Ialin still understood enough to shift his attention to the new discovery. The lacy little wings beat wildly, stirring a gentle wind through Zylas' fur. The warmth of impending change swirled through his blood. By the reckoning of Collins' world, he had fifteen minutes. Zylas did not bother to warn his friends. They all measured in switch times, and reminding the hummingbird of his friend's looming death would only add to the plethora of nervous energy that assailed him at all times. Vernon's frequent trips to the storage room for honey and sugar had kept Ialin alive so far; but the more upset he got, the more energy the little bird/man expended. And Vernon would know about the coming change because he was also feeling those stirrings.

That last realization mobilized Zylas. Before he could emit a warning, however, Vernon squeaked first. "She's coming. Carriequinton's coming."

*It's over.* Zylas refused to dwell on his own approaching fate. "Vernon, run!"

"No!"

"Run, damn it! Get out of here." Worried the mouse's loyalty would serve no useful purpose, Zylas preyed on it. "Do it for me, Vernon, as my last wish. The cause can't survive without both of us, and the lady needs to know what happened here."

With clear reluctance, Vernon turned tail and scurried back the way he had come. He had barely enough time till his change to get beyond the castle walls. Once there, he was safe. A royal patrol might find him, but only if they stumbled upon him before one of the hundreds of forest creatures in his employ did. Even then, the king's guards would have no right or reason to capture him.

Footsteps clomped on the stairs, Quinton's eternally angry tread. Beneath the noise, a close soft click touched Zylas' sensitive rat ears.

*The lock?* That reminded Zylas of his companion. "Ialin, fly!"

Too birdlike to reply in words, Ialin continued to tug at the lock.

"Fly! Fly!" Zylas squeaked frantically.

Quinton shouted, "Hey! Hey, you!" She charged toward the cage. "Get away from there, you damned bird." Her footsteps quickened as she raced toward them.

Ialin surged into the air in a sudden flurry of wings and feathers. He zipped forward.

Quinton made a leap for the hummingbird, tripped over something Zylas could not see, and tumbled to the floor amid a clatter of falling objects.

*Go, Ialin! Go!*

Ialin appeared suddenly in Zylas' vision, zipping at full speed toward the mirror.

*What's he doing?* With abrupt terror, Zylas understood. Nearly devoid of overlap, Ialin had mistaken the reflection for another room. Zylas had heard of young birds killing themselves by slamming into well-polished metal. If Ialin hit the mirror at his current speed, he would smash his skull and die before he was even aware of the impact, "Ialin, no! Swerve! Damn you, swerve!"

The warning came too late. At top speed, Ialin struck the mirror.

Zylas moaned out an unratlike noise, "No." He cringed, waiting for the terrible sound of impact that never came, Ialin passed through the mirror as if through an open door. *A portal! It's a magical portal!* As he stared, shaking his head, Zylas felt the prickle of the change passing in a wave through him. His time was running short, and the lock remained in place. Dismissing what he had just seen, he thrust his tail through the bars, wrapping it around the cold metal.

Quinton ran toward the mirror, swearing viciously. Her hair grew in strange patches amid the hectic swirl of scar tissue. As if in afterthought, she seized Zylas' cage. Thrown suddenly against the bars, Zylas clamped his claws against them, seeking grounding in a world gone mad. The index finger of Quinton's right hand came tantalizingly near his mouth, but it never occurred to him to bite. All of his concentration was directed at wrapping his tail around the padlock and desperately hoping he had not imagined the click.

Collins' escort stopped in front of an ironbound wooden door, and the incongruity of that one man-made entity in the middle of natural caverns took inordinately long to register. "What's this?" His voice emerged slurred, even to his own ears. Clearly, he had lost more blood than he had realized.

"It's a door," Margast said.

*Does he think I've lost my mind?* Pain and grinding fatigue made Collins irritable. "I can see it's a fucking door. Where's it go?"

The lioness whined.

The skinny girl shrugged. "We don't know. No one's managed to open it."

"Locked?" Collins examined the deteriorating structure. It looked as if a solid kick would shatter the soggy wood, leaving only rusted bands of iron on sagging hinges.

"I don't think so." Margast's blue gaze fell to the latch, where Collins saw no bolt or keyhole. "Touching it hurts, though, and it screams."

The description sounded familiar to Collins. *Warded*. The only similar magic he knew of kept switchers from the royal quarters. He hoped this worked the same way. Raising his arm, he reached for the latch. His watch slid on his wrist. Since 11:45, he had deliberately avoided glancing at it, superstitiously convinced that if he could not see the time passing, it remained the same. Now, as he readjusted the band, he accidentally read the time. 11:57 *a.m.* Tears burned Collins' eyes. *Good-bye, Zylas.*

Steeling for a ward that might work even against him, Collins reached for the latch. He would open

that door no matter the difficulty, no matter the pain. But none came. The door swung open, its rusted hinges screaming, to reveal a room as craggy as the rest of the caverns. A padded wooden chair stood planted toward the middle, several feet from a huge dark pit in the center. Behind him, the animals and humans stared curiously. As Collins entered, Margast attempted to follow, then dropped back with a shrill cry of pain.

Suddenly, a flash of emerald zipped past, in the form of what appeared to be a large insect. *Ialin?* Before Collins could consider the possibility in more detail, Carrie Quinton charged into the cave, swinging her arms and swearing viciously, a small cage tucked beneath her right arm. A hairless, pink tail protruding through the bars worked frantically at a combination padlock that hung, unlatched, from the door. Before Collins' eyes, the rat's form blurred. *Zylas, it's Zylas.* Terror slammed him with a rush of adrenaline. *I'm about to watch him implode.* The idea galloped through his mind in half an instant. Faster than thought, he hurled himself across the room.

Quinton screamed, leaping from Collins' path. He wrenched the cage from her grip, twisting off the lock as momentum skidded him into an outcropping. He ignored the pain that impact flared through his injured hip and thrust his hand into the cage. By now, Zylas had become an incomprehensible glow. Seizing an unidentified body part, Collins tore the changing creature from the cage.

For a terrifying instant, it resisted. Then, Zylas flew free, body arcing through the air to land hard on the rocks. As he assumed man form, he continued sliding, out of control, toward the pit.

"No!" Once again, Collins found himself lurching to his friend's rescue.

"You bastard!" Quinton shouted. A heaved stone slammed into Collins' shoulder with a raw agony that would have stopped him in his tracks, had he not already sent himself airborne. His wits were nearly scattered, and his arm felt broken. He watched, helpless, as Zylas' pale form went over the edge of the pit, fingers scrabbling wildly at the edge.

That small attempt of Zylas' to save himself gained Collins the seconds he needed. He managed to stop his own forward movement at the lip of the pit and grabbed blindly at his friend. By dumb luck, his fingers winched around one of Zylas' naked forearms. They both stared downward, dislodged pebbles toppling thirty feet to rain down on two enormous dark shapes below them. *The dragons!*

Collins lay still, focusing all his strength into supporting his dangling friend. All the exhaustion, all the suffering of the last few hours crashed back upon him at once. He closed his eyes as dizziness washed over him, hoping only that he could hold on long enough to regain some semblance of strength, that, somehow, he would find a way to bring them both safely out of danger.

Abruptly, Collins sensed a nearby presence. He whipped open his lids to find Quinton towering over him, her face hideous with scars, her mouth an asymmetrical sneer. "So, you found them. You found them all. What good does it do you?"

Collins' mind staggered through a tired coating of fuzz. He licked lips that had gone dry as sand. "Carrie. Help us."

"Why?"

So simple a question deserved an answer Collins could not find in the desert of his fading thoughts. He tried to summon back the natural body chemicals that had given him the ability to act so quickly to save Zylas. "Because the fall alone might kill us. Because, no matter how much you hate us, you don't want to become a murderer." Collins' arms ached, and his grip grew slippery on Zylas' forearm.

Quinton laughed. "I've already crossed that line, with people I didn't hate half so much as I do you. She drew right up to where he lay, prone, on the rocks, clutching Zylas. "You sec, Ben," she spat out his name like a bite of bitter fruit, "dragons are natural carnivores. It didn't take long to teach them to eat Barakhai's undesirables, and King Terrin was glad to hand execution duties to me." She grinned with an



inhuman wickedness. "He thinks I got rid of the dragons, too. But watch this." She called down into the darkness. "Dinnertime!"

The creatures in the pit surged like hungry crocodiles. It seemed to Collins that he could not catch a break. He wondered why none of this could have happened while at least one of the dragons held its human form.

Zylas was speaking quickly in a low voice that did not carry. It sounded to Collins like praying, an option that seemed like the only one left. But Collins still had one prospect—that Quinton had not fallen wholly into madness. "Carrie, please. Let's talk this out like civilized human beings."

"We're not," she hissed, "anymore."

"I am," Collins insisted. "And I believe, deep down, you are, too."

Carrie drew back her foot.

Aware he could not block a kick, Collins continued talking. "I'll do anything you want, Carrie. Anything. Just name it."

Carrie barely hesitated. "Marry me."

Collins despised the thought, but he would have promised more. "Done."

Quinton's boot crashed into the bandage on the back of Collins' head. His thoughts exploded. His grip on Zylas faltered. "Do you think I'd marry a jackass like you? I'd rather watch you die." She kicked him again.

Collins lay in a red fog of agony. He forced words through the pain. "Carrie, please. What... do... you... want?"

Quinton slammed the toe of her boot into Collins' groin. Cramps tore through his abdomen. Every muscle went limp. His hold on Zylas failed, and he watched the white blur of his friend's descent through eyes filled with tears. Quinton brought her face right up to Collins' and whispered in his ear. "I want... you both... to die." Then, she hammered both fists into the back of his claw-ravaged head.

Collins felt himself falling, twisted, and grabbed the only thing he could: Quinton's leg. He felt it give way. Then air surged around him, and he realized they were both tumbling in savage circles into the pit. Screeching, she embraced him like a lover, all semblance of righteous vengeance lost. They spun wildly for a moment. She was on the bottom when they hit rock-solid ground with enough force to drive all the breath from his lungs, too. Pain stabbed his chest, and he heard bones snap, most of them Quinton's. She lay still beneath him.

Suddenly, Collins felt hot breath puffing over him. Still gasping for air, he rolled to face a colossal mouth filled with dagger teeth. He only hoped he would die of suffocation before those massive canines skewered him.

Then air wheezed into Collins' lungs, bringing instinctive comfort even though it violated his wish.

Zylas spoke weakly, but his tone brooked no defiance. "Trinya, no! Bad girl! Bad girl!"

The massive teeth did not withdraw, but they did not impale Collins either. He willed himself to dodge but could not conjure up the strength even to save his own life. "Zylas," he gasped. "Zylas, she's listening."

Zylas did not respond. "Trinya... remember... me. Come on, girl, remember. Tell... your friend... to get his claws... out of my ribs."

Collins did not know how long the albino had tried to speak with his daughter, but now he guessed that the low talk he had heard had more to do with attempts to communicate with her, rather than with begging some god to save him. He cringed at Zylas' plight. Dragon claws could stab all the way through a man. Collins remained silent. He had nothing to add to the situation, and the effort of speaking might steal

what remained of his consciousness. *Don't give up, Zylas.*

Then, a strange and hesitant voice touched Collins' mind. *\*Papa?\**

"That's right, Trinya. It's your Papa."

*\*Papa?\**

"I've never stopped loving you, Trinya. I've been searching, and now I'm so happy I've found you."

*\*Papa?\** The dragon seemed incapable of saying anything more. She retreated from Collins, to his vast relief.

The pit went silent, and Collins hoped Zylas had simply switched to mental communication. Cautiously, measuring each movement against vertigo, Collins slid off of Quinton. He winched his fist closed around a rock.

After a long silence, Zylas' voice startled Collins. "Carriequinton! Watch our backs. Where is she?"

Collins studied the woman lying still on the rocks. Her tortured features had gone lax, peaceful for the first time since he had met her. What little sanity she had maintained at that time had vanished, leaving a cruel and soulless shell. If she survived, she would need intensive inpatient therapy and strong medications; she would surely refuse both. He could not allow her to cause more suffering to herself, to Barakhai's innocents, to anyone else. He told his conscience that Quinton was already dead or, if not, she would never make it out of the pit. Then, without further thought, he slammed the stone down on her skull with all his remaining might.

Bone collapsed beneath the blow, and dark clotted blood barely oozed from the wound. Collins' gut pitched wildly, and he vomited. Wiping his mouth, he finally managed to speak, as if he had done nothing more than touch the pulse point at her neck. "She's dead."

Zylas loosed a relieved sigh. "Now," he said with frightening weakness. "Trinya, Artoth, get us out of here."

Though more worried about the dragons eating him than getting left behind, Benton Collins dragged himself up Trinya's side to settle against the V of musculature between her left wing and neck. His left arm barely functioned. His head throbbed, his body ached, and unconsciousness hovered, promising a reprieve to which he dared not surrender. He doubted the young dragons had experience serving as living helicopters, or that they had the maturity to understand complex commands or situations. His grip and balance might be the only things between him and a deadly fall.

"Are you secured?" Zylas called tiredly through the darkness. Despite his own ordeal and injuries, Zylas had the presence of mind to remain focused and in control.

For once, Collins resisted cracking a joke. "Safe and sound." He forced some courage of his own. "Don't forget Ialin."

"He's with me." Zylas paused.

Collins presumed the rat/man was communing with his daughter, so the next words surprised him.

"And he wants me to thank you for worrying over his welfare." Zylas added in deliberate English, "Told you he'd come around."

Collins mouthed a weary smile, though no one could see it. He had never truly believed Ialin would ever grow to like him, despite the albino's reassurances. "So how do we get out of this prison? Surely the dragons can't fly out of this pit, or they would have done so long ago. And how are we going to get them out of the caverns past the magical wards?"

"Just hold on tight, and don't let anything surprise you." Without further warning, Zylas disappeared beneath the slap of leathery wings against air. The dragon he had called Artoth rose from the pit, carrying

the rat/man with him. A moment later, muscles shifted beneath Collins' buttocks, and Trinya sprang into awkward flight behind the other dragon.

Thrown sideways, Collins eased into a prone position, hugging the dragon's scales. They felt warm and dry against his skin, smoother than Prinivere's, but not slimy or slippery. A world of difference existed between Trinya's jerky movements and the old dragon's easy grace. He shifted his body weight in miniscule increments, seeking the safest, most comfortable position. Finally reasonably secure, he raised his head, only to find himself rocketing toward his own reflection in a large mirror.

Collins screamed, ducking behind his outstretched hands. Ignoring her passenger's consternation, the dragon flashed through the polished surface as if through open air. The universe seemed to hiccup, then Collins found himself hovering on Trinya's back in a storage room filled with large, unidentifiable shapes swathed in tattered bolts of cloth. Artoth stood on the floor, while a disheveled and limping Zylas struggled with the mirror. Ialin flittered wildly around him.

Suddenly, it all made sense. Quinton must have found the mirror in storage, discovered its ability to reflect her undamaged face, and kept it for her own. Given the king's ban on magic, she had hidden it in her wardrobe, eventually discovering its true purpose. And probably the dragons had remained in the pit because they didn't know they could escape. After all, they were mere babes in dragon years.

Trinya dropped to the ground beside Artoth, and the two nuzzled one another like old friends separated for days, not moments. They had clearly relied heavily on one another throughout their ordeal. "We're in the castle?" Collins guessed.

"The dungeon level." Zylas finally managed to heave the mirror onto Artoth's back. "Hold on tight, and try to look like you have control over your... mount." He settled onto the base of Artoth's neck, a leg dangling on either side.

Wondering how difficult Zylas found it to call his daughter a "mount," Collins scrambled to the same position on Trinya and found it far steadier than the one he previously held. It allowed him to balance more like the way he might on horseback, and he had the ability to clamp on tightly with his arms and knees, if necessary. He could even stay on upside down, though he hoped he would never have to test that theory.

The dragons walked across the floor, picking their way around the stacked furniture. Zylas reached across Artoth's neck to flip open the door onto another storage area. Unable to avoid the carefully piled provisions, the dragons hulled through crates, boxes, and bags with little attention to the carnage left in their wakes. Collins glanced to his left as Trinya's wing dislodged a bag of flour that immersed him in a billowing white cloud. Her tail sent a crate tumbling. It shattered, releasing a multicolored wash of buttons, ruffles, and lace. A shadow loomed over Collins, and he swiveled his head just in time to see a dangling cookpot headed for his face. He ducked, feeling it graze his dried, blood- and sweat-plastered hair. Ahead of them, a door jerked open to reveal half a dozen startled guards and the familiar dungeon cells beyond them.

For a moment, no one did anything but stare.

Zylas broke the silence. "Move," he commanded the guards.

The guards shifted nervously, glancing at one another. Though they did not retreat, they showed no sign of attacking either.

Collins broke the stalemate with a pitiful roar, but the toddler dragon took the cue. Trinya mimicked him, the sound welling up from deep in her enormous diaphragm. Feeling her movement, Collins clamped his hands over his ears just in time. The roar belched out of her with the power of fire and brimstone, and terror crashed through Collins despite his foreknowledge of the power of a dragon's roar. The guards whirled and fled in a panicked scramble, opening the way for the dragons and their riders.

"Thank you," Zylas called after them as Collins managed a shaky laugh. He wondered if he could ever grow as accustomed to the sound as Zylas apparently had. Ialin fluttered up the steps, Artoth squeezing through the winding stairwell behind him.

Even with her wings tightly folded, Trinya struggled between the tightly packed banisters. At the ground level landing, they faced the open portcullis and the massive door to the inner courtyard.

Collins leaned toward the panel. "I'll get it."

Before he could snag the latch, Artoth's massive body slammed against the wood. The door shuddered wildly, and Collins scrambled out of the way. Again, the dragon crashed against it; and, this time, the wood shattered like a thin layer of ice. Wood shards sprayed the courtyard, people and animals ran screaming, and the dragon struggled into the air like a gangly, half-grown condor. Trinya flew after him, her wing beats slapping Collins with cold whirlwinds of air. Lying low, he clung to her neck and waited for one of the renegades' flying spies to find them and lead them to Prinivere.

Benton Collins awakened in a sudden rush of amazing clarity. His headache had disappeared, and the many injuries that had plagued him for the last hours he could remember seemed to have disappeared. He kept his eyes tightly closed, afraid that he would find himself back in Algary Hospital. He dreaded the barrage of questions that would certainly follow, the lies he would have to concoct to keep himself out of some mental institution, the even stranger looks the professors and other students would inflict upon him. *Oh. That Ben Collins.*

Gentle hands caressed his body, soothing the skin where they touched. He focused on this comfort, enjoying it as long as he dared, dodging the grilling that revealing his awakening might invoke.

*\*You're up.\** The voice penetrated Collins' thoughts with a light sweetness that made it seem to float into his mind, bypassing his ears. Then, suddenly, he realized that was exactly what it had done. He was still in Barakhai.

Collins opened his eyes to another cave. Three massive dragon heads hovered over him, breath warm and sugary, their allspice dragon scent perfuming the air, their claws skipping lightly over his wounds. Zylas lay beside him, also prone, naked, and still in man form. Dirt peppered his snowy skin, and his pale blue eyes pecked out from fallen strands of white-blond hair. Prinivere instructed the younger two dragons in a wild barrage of mental communication that made little sense to Collins. The mirror portal stood against the wall at the farthest edge of Collins' vision.

Collins glanced at his watch, only to find spidery lines through the glass and a nonfunctioning display. Korfius trotted in frantic circles around them as a dog, which made it either before 3 p.m. or after 8 p.m.

Collins locked gazes with Zylas. "I see you got the portal."

"I suppose that's stealing," Zylas admitted, a red flush suffusing his cheeks. "But the king would only have destroyed it once he discovered—"

Collins cut off the explanation with a wave. "No justification necessary. I was just impressed that something so fragile made it here intact. I couldn't keep my eyes open long enough to bring us safely here, let alone an enormous, breakable knickknack."

Zylas tipped his head in a gesture that passed for a shrug. "You were hurt worse. And you're not a soldier." He grinned. "You got us through the worst of it. That roar of yours was inspired. How did you know she'd copy you?"

"Never met a toddler who didn't like to imitate loud noises." Collins smiled, hoping the dragons read his thoughts of appreciation through the confusion of their own conversation. He knew the others would already have thanked them, but he would do so personally when time allowed it. "Where's... " he

started, preparing to ask about Falima. Then, not wanting to put one name above the others, he said instead, "the others?"

Zylas answered. "Talin and Aisa are scouting, checking how our escape affected the castle. Apparently, King Terrin knew nothing about Carriequinton's sojourns in the caverns, nor that the dragons were still alive. Vernon's at home, where he's needed. Falima..." He swiveled his head. "Well, ask her yourself."

At that moment, Falima stepped into view. She wore a simple, plain dress that left him to imagine the exquisite curves that lay beneath it. Her sapphire eyes were swollen with tears and worry, her black hair wind-whipped to a snarl. She was the most beautiful woman in the world, and Collins found himself breathless.

Falima raised her brows. "You've got that hungry look again. And, this time, I'm not even naked."

Collins searched for his tongue, but it betrayed him, blurring out words he had not intended to say, "I love you, Falima."

She came toward him with natural grace. Her high cheekbones, golden skin, and spare lips became the very definition of perfection. She crouched to meet his gaze. "You said that already. Or did staring over the brink of death make you forget I love you, too?"

Now Collins wished he had saved the sentiment. There seemed no way to explain how his devotion had escalated to a heart-pounding fever complete with fireworks and the farthest reaches of heaven. "I've never loved anyone more."

Zylas cleared his throat, as if to remind the pair that they shared the room with others. "I'm devastated, Ben. I thought I was your one and only."

Collins barely heard him. "I want to be with you forever. Falima, I want you to marry me."

Falima slid between the two men and ruffled Collins' blood-matted hair. "Sweetie, there's still so much we don't know." She looked at the dragons hopefully. When she got no reply from Prinivere, she continued, "Can they lift the Curse? If they do, what becomes of us switchers?" She sighed heavily. "What if I'm a horse forever?"

Collins could not believe God would do that to him. He had finally found a woman he loved without conditions and a world that saw him as competent and capable, a place where he dared to become a hero, despite the risks. "Then I'll marry a horse. And love you just the same."

"You're an idiot," she said.

Collins agreed. "But at least I'd be your idiot."

Beyond Falima, Zylas rolled his eyes, shaking his head.

Prinivere finally joined the conversation. *\*Currently, the younglings don't switch forms. They'll stay dragons until their maturity level catches up with their human forms.\**

Zylas sat up. "How long will that take?"

Prinivere fell into silence for several moments, calculating. *\*I would guess about... three or four hundred.\**

"Days?" Zylas supplied. "Weeks?"

*\* Years. \**

"Wow." Zylas gave the exact same reply Collins would have. The albino would never see his daughter in her human form again, would never know how much she resembled himself or his beloved late wife. Still, he smiled, content. She had returned to him from the dead, and she remembered him.

*\*Would you like to know my opinion?\**

Though Collins did not know which subject Prinivere meant to share her opinion on, he wanted to hear what she had to say on anything.

Falima nodded, and Zylas said, "Absolutely, my lady."

*\*We don't yet have the ability to lift the Curse. The younglings need more experience, more maturity.\**

"How long?" Zylas spoke the words for all of them.

*\*A century, at least. Longer if I'm not still here to help.\**

To Collins' surprise, no one objected to Prinivere's suggestion that she might not live long enough to assist in the project. The silence seemed awkward. It reminded him of how, at the end of every Christmas celebration, Great-Aunt Gertrude would say, "See you next year, God willing." They would always protest the possibility that she might not survive another year, even as her seventies became her eighties and old age finally claimed her. To say nothing felt like tacit condemnation, like giving death permission to remove her from the family.

Falima dropped her head.

Collins took her hand. "That doesn't change the way I feel about you. We'll deal with it."

"I can't go to your world."

"No," Collins confirmed.

"Do you love me enough to stay in mine?" Finally Falima raised her head to him, and Collins made certain to look right into her eyes.

"I do," he said without hesitation, without a trace of doubt. "But it's not really the life sentence you think it is. With Prinivere's help, I could go back occasionally, explain things to my parents, let them know I'm safe and happy." He smiled, squeezing her hand. "Bring back a Twinkie now and then."

Prinivere waited for them to finish before continuing. *\*There are modifications we can make now, until we can fully lift the Curse. We can create smaller magics that help switchers learn to control what they have: to increase the time spent in their preferred forms, to increase overlap, to allow those with strong overlap to control the switch itself so they can take whichever form they wish whenever they desire it.\**

Collins did not fully understand, but his companions bobbed their heads. "Are you saying you and the younglings could help Falima spend more time in human form? That you could give her enough overlap to understand me well even when she's a horse?"

"That's exactly what she's saying." Falima faced Collins and took his other hand. "And someone like Zylas, who has near-perfect overlap, could switch between rat form and human form at his own whim."

Collins looked at Zylas to determine how close Falima had come to the truth, only to find the albino standing utterly still, eyes wide, clearly considering the implications of her words.

Collins also found himself thinking about the possibilities. Controlled shapeshifting seemed more of a gift than a liability, even better than the royals' full-time humanity. *Cool!* He found himself wishing he had a switch-form. Collins considered another important detail, concerned for Korfius. "What happens to life span? To intelligence and memory?"

*\*I'm not sure.\** Prinivere scratched behind one eye with a claw. *\*I can't remember if human and animal life spans differed much before the Curse. They both seemed pitifully short compared with mine.\** She replaced her claw and fixed a craggy eye on Collins. *\*The intertwining of humans and animals has gone on so long in Barakhai, I don't think we can ever wholly separate what gets*

*passed to future generations. And that's not a bad thing.\**

Collins had to agree. Mongrel dogs tended to live longer than the inbred species and to demonstrate higher intelligence. Carrie Quinton would have understood the details better than he could, but he suspected the genes of humans and animals in Barakhai probably had become inseparable.

Prinivere finished her point, *\*Lifting the Curse can't change history or "blood." I believe the natural life spans of all creatures of Barakhai will remain reasonably equal, in the realm of a hundred years, at least for the next several centuries. Longer for those with dragon blood.\** She glanced at Zylas. *\*As to intelligence...\** She flicked a claw. *\*I think the same applies. It varies widely enough already.\**

Collins had to agree.

Prinivere grinned and sent him a happy image of powder-blue sky speckled with clouds, filled with swooping dragon shadows.

Collins smiled at the joy the rescue he had assisted in brought to the old dragon as well as to the regular citizenry of Barakhai. Through Trinya and Artoth, a new generation of dragons might return to Barakhai as well.

*\*And, if I might venture one more opinion, you should accept that proposal.\**

It took Collins inordinately long to figure out what Prinivere meant.

"Yes," Falima said, the word coming out of nowhere.

Collins blinked. "What?"

"Yes," Falima said. "I'll marry you."

*Thank you,* Collins thought in Prinivere's direction. Not long ago, he had believed himself too young for marriage, but now the idea filled him with an excitement that seemed eternal. He caught Falima into a gleeful embrace, and Korfius shoved in to shower the announcement with happy dog kisses.

## Epilogue

IN Vernon's cottage in the middle of the Barakhai woodlands, Benton Collins slouched in a hard log chair watching Korfius wrestle with the puppy he now knew as Farrihn. The two rolled and yipped across the floor under the watchful eye of the puppy's father, Ralthoroh, now in a human form that little resembled the huge, pointy-eared furball Collins had encountered in the carnivore caverns. Falima explained the intricacies of furniture to the too-skinny girl while Mataia, the tortoise, cruised around the confines, exploring every object. Vernon ran a hand through his tight black curls, studying a Wendy's fried potato pinched between his fingers. "What do you call these things again?"

"French fries." Though Collins addressed Vernon, he kept his gaze on Falima, thrilled by every confident movement, every casual toss of her ebony hair. "Though I'm not sure why. They aren't any more French than Canadian bacon is Canadian." He added with sudden realization, "Or even bacon."

Vernon's long silence finally drew Collins' attention. He turned to find the enormous black man staring at him, thick brows arched. "You do know you're speaking gibberish, don't you?"

Collins could understand why none of his tangential jabbering would translate. "Yeah, I know. I've got

to do something every once in a while to remind you I'm a foreigner."

"You mean in case your weird clothes and your weird food and the weird little devices you bring back with you aren't enough?"

"Exactly."

Vernon popped the fry into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. Having exhausted his conversation with Collins for the moment, he addressed Falima. "I heard you got offered a guard position at the castle."

Falima raised her head, hands on the rope pulls of Vernon's dresser. Crouched beside her, Skinny Girl continued to examine the cupboard. "I'm not taking it."

The last Collins knew, his fiancée was still considering the offer. "Why not?"

Falima ruffled the other woman's tawny hair. "The cavern people need someone to help them adjust to civilization. I'd rather do that, at least for now." She turned back to the dresser. "Besides, if I'm going to preach that people no longer have to pursue careers prearranged by their animal form, I should set an example."

Though it bothered Collins that Falima had not consulted him before making her final decision, he found some solace in the realization that she had helped him make an equally difficult choice. "If we're not living on the castle grounds, I guess I can't take that job as adviser to the king." He shrugged. "The thought of following in Carrie Quinton's footsteps crept me out anyway."

Falima rose and approached Collins, Skinny Girl following her every movement with worried eyes. "Sweetie, I can do my work anywhere. Just because I'm not a guard doesn't mean we can't live in Opernes Castle." She put her hands on the back of his chair and kissed the top of his head. "You don't have to walk the same path as Carriequinton just because you hold the same title."

Vernon added his piece, "Barakhai could really use someone like you to help keep the king on the moral path." He winked at Falima. "Besides, you could socialize with the new captain of security. I hear he's well qualified for the job, despite being... vermin." *Vermin? No way. Not—*

Falima gasped, completing his thought aloud. "Zylas? Zylas is King Terrin's new captain of security?"

"Can you think of anyone better suited to fill the post?" Collins doubted the king of Barakhai could find anyone as capable as the man who had dedicated his life to bringing together the most diverse people in the world, to gaining, winning, and keeping their loyalty and respect. That Zylas could speak every language, including those of animals, and mutated into a rat at will, would only sweeten the deal. Collins believed Terrin wise enough to understand the enormous asset he had obtained and that he could count on the rebels to support him so long as he followed the advice of his new captain. *A monarchy kept strong by alliances instead of magical physical advantage.* "Better suited than Zylas?" He shook his head with such vigor, it tousled his hair into knots. "Not on any world."